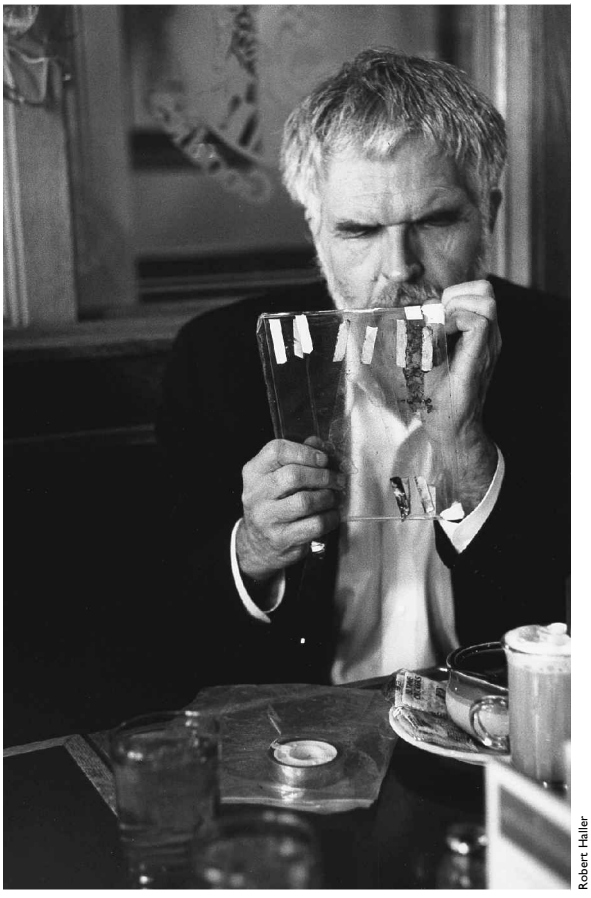
Scott MacDonald

The Filmmaker as Visionary

Excerpts from an Interview with Stan Brakhage



Stan Brakhage hand-painting a film in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995.

Robert Haller

When he died on March 9th of this year in Victoria, British Columbia, Stan Brakhage was the preeminent figure in American avant-garde filmmaking. The quality of his best work and its influence, both within the history of alternative media and beyond, and the power of his voice and his example, are unprecedented and unequaled. Indeed, Brakhage's creative productivity was so remarkable for so long—*The Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalogue 2000,* his primary American rental resource, lists nearly 300 Brakhage films—that few scholars have had the temerity to engage Brakhage's career, no matter how enthusiastic they are about the films. Of those who have worked at coming to grips with this astonishing oeuvre, P. Adams Sitney (see *Visionary Film* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974]), Fred Camper (see http://www.fredcamper.com/), and Marie Nesthus (see her Ph.D. thesis, *A Crucible of Document: The Sequence Films of Stan Brakhage, 1968–1984* [N.Y.U., 1999]) have been the most successful.

During the 1950s, Brakhage broke away from the tradition of the psychodrama (the short dramatization of a disturbed state of mind had been a staple of American avant-garde film, from Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* [1943] and Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* [1947] through Brakhage's own *Reflections on Black* [1955]). Following the lead of Marie Menken, Brakhage freed the 16mm camera from the tripod and embraced new orders of cinematic motion more akin to abstract expressionist painting and free-form poetry than to mainstream filmmaking. Film by film, he articulated what became a theory of sight, and a new mission for cinema. Brakhage theorized that acculturation involves the gradual constriction of the freedom of sight we witness in young children, so that, as we mature, we come to understand *what* is socially acceptable to look at, and *how* we should look at what we see. This process of acculturation also involves learning what dimensions of the visible we must *not* look at. These become visual taboos, many of which involve

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bodily processes—sex, birth, aging, death—the very stuff of life. From Brakhage's point of view, mass-market film and television are a crucial dimension of this acculturation; they use the cinematic apparatus to reinforce rigid, conformist, sterile, thoroughly materialistic ways of seeing, and living.

Brakhage's response was to use the motion picture camera—the quintessential product of Western technological development—against the grain of its history and its usual functions, as a means of reaccessing at least an evocation of the world of childhood sight "before the 'beginning was the word'" (Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision,* paragraph 1), that is, before the child's expulsion from the world "under childhood" into the world of language and social expectations. For Brakhage, the camera became a new pair of glasses that he could train on precisely those dimensions of real experience that his social training had argued were taboo, which he filmed with a gestural freedom that itself evoked the freedom of the untrained baby's eye, and painstakingly edited into complex montage structures.

The resulting films sometimes met with considerable resistance: for example, Amos Vogel's refusal to show *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), one of Brakhage's first evocations of childhood sight, at the New York film society, Cinema 16, was one of the instigations of the New American Cinema group led by Jonas Mekas and the transformation of the history of avant-garde film exhibition and distribution in America. In time, audiences developed for Brakhage's new visionary cinema, particularly for his personal interpretations of birth (*Window Water Baby Moving* [1959], *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* [1961]), death and decay (*Sirius Remembered* [1958], *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* [1971]), and the experience of losing childhood sight itself (*Scenes from Under Childhood, Sections #1-4* [1967–1970]).

As a young college professor in the 1970s (I'm sure my experiences with Brakhage's work are not unusual), I came to depend on Brakhage films to invigorate my classroom teaching, not only in courses relating to avant-garde film, or even to film in general, but in nearly every course I taught. Confronting my first-year writing students with *Window Water Baby Moving,* and challenging them to come to grips with the visceral experience of the film and its implications for how we experience the world, became one of the predictable high points of the semester. Showing *The Wonder Ring* (1955) and *Sirius Remembered*, and then asking my film students to retrain their perception and their consciousness of what they actually perceive often resulted in a level of student engagement always difficult to achieve. In my nearly 40 years of college teaching, I have discovered no filmmaker of greater pedagogical value.

By the 1990s, as a result of the growing cost of film stock and development, and of changes in his domestic life, including the end of his 30-year marriage to Jane Collum Brakhage, Brakhage was focusing on painting-on-film (painting on the filmstrip itself, and printing the results), though he did provide one final homage to his first marriage and to Jane Brakhage, in *The Loom* (1986). In dozens of hand-painted films, Brakhage extended the history of abstract expressionist painting, which had fascinated him as a youth, until the discovery, in 1997, that he had bladder cancer instigated a series of lovely photographed films, including the gem *Commingled Containers* (1997).

Anthology Film Archives

Anthology Film Archives

Left: Baby being born and hand-painted filmstrip, in *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*. Right: Young man blinded by a new vision in Brakhage's early psychodrama, *Reflections on Black*.

Commingled Containers is a confirmation of a crucial dimension of Brakhage's work: his commitment to using film as a means of representing his own spiritual quest and of capturing evocations of the spirit in the world around us. Brakhage has regularly talked of his films as having been "given to him to make," as the products of spirit moving through him; and throughout his filmmaking career he has articulated and elaborated on the metaphor of light as spirit. This spiritual quest has been consistently evident in Brakhage's fascination with the lovely worlds of light that exist just at the edges of our normal perceptual range and just beyond the camera's normal, "correct" focal points. Indeed, Brakhage's mature films are often meditations on the ineffable qualities of reflection and refraction.

Commingled Containers is a quintessential Brakhage film in this regard. In the face of possibly imminent death, Brakhage immersed his camera lens in Boulder Creek and discovered there a spectacular lightscape, created by the friction of water against rock. In the opening image of *Potemkin* (1925), Sergei Eisenstein used the waves breaking against the rocks as an emblem of the proletariat wearing away the power of the czars; for Brakhage, the meeting of water and stone is also an emblem of finitude, even of mortality, but *this* friction creates figures of light that function as metaphors of Light. It is, after all, the reality of material decay that makes transcendence possible. *Commingled Containers* expresses Brakhage's determination to continue his cinespiritual quest, despite his fear of mortality, for as long as it is given to him to remain in the flow of life.

In 2002, Brakhage's move to Victoria, British Columbia, with his second wife, Marilyn Jull, and their two young sons seemed to signal the end of an era in American independent cinema. A variety of factors, including considerable financial stress, led to this move, which serves as a reminder of how little support even the most accomplished American film artists can expect from their government and their cultural institutions. Brakhage, one of the greatest American filmmakers and one of our most remarkable artists, did not find it possible to continue living in his native land.

Throughout his battle with cancer, Brakhage remained high-spirited and productive. Indeed, even as his life was slipping away, he was working on *The Chinese Series*, scratching directly onto 35mm black leader with his fingernails—holding on to life and creativity until the very end.

Ellipses Reel 2 (1976), produced without photography by working directly on the filmstrip.

Fred Camper

Anticipation of the Night

STAN BRAKHAGE: It's curious. The qualities of a work that will make it last often aren't visible to its maker. You're just stuck with the work that has come through you, usually when you were in some degree of trance or some kind of desperate state. And even though an artist may feel obligated—as I certainly have often felt—to go out and speak for the work right away, to help give it a life on earth, *you're* the work's first audience and you find it as difficult as other audiences do. That's something I think a lot of people don't understand. You have to take the work on faith, both as a maker and as an audience.

Whatever faults there are in *Anticipation of the Night*—and there are many—it was produced through a process of *such* absolute sincerity. I mean, it was desperate making and a gift to me, but not one that I accepted easily, because it lost me friends and brought every kind of abuse down on my head. All I *can* trust is that this work continues to insist on being made. I know that I'm not mad. I may be a fool, but I'm not mad. There *is* an integrity to this process and I *will* continue to struggle to try to raise the money to get the films printed—horrible as that struggle can be—and to push the work out there, when there are only about four places in the United States it will probably ever be shown. When I made *Anticipation,* there was *only* Cinema 16, and Amos Vogel wouldn't show it! I guess there's some deep fear of the new thing.

SCOTT MACDONALD: *I've been thinking about the period from around 1957 through 1962: What were some of the pivotal moments that created the change that we see in* Anticipation of the Night, Loving, Window Water Baby Moving, *and* Sirius Remembered*?*
Well, I didn't know it when I made it, but *Nightcats,* in 1956—though it's hardly avant-garde and not shocking to anyone—has a quality of aesthetics without which *Anticipation of the Night* is not imaginable.

It does have a remarkable sensitivity to texture . . .
And a belief in the plastic cut, a belief that one form flowing into another is more visual than one scene being intercut with another, or being chopped into close-ups, long shots, and shot/counter shots, and so forth. Narrative drama tends to be chopped up, while *Nightcats* is much more intrinsically musical. I didn't know and couldn't have said these things when I was making *Nightcats,* but the whole evolution of the relationship between film and music in my work comes into the making of *Nightcats,* in contradistinction to the film that I had just finished, *Flesh of Morning*—the ultimate of what we used to call psychodrama.

I often think of P. Adams Sitney's juxtaposition of a shot from Thigh Line Lyre Triangular *and an image of a de Kooning painting. How much was abstract expressionist painting in your mind at this point?*
By the time we're talking about, I had seen many of the paintings of Pollock and some of the earlier paintings of de Kooning and Kline and others. I haunted the galleries. I began to be aware that a lot of what was called abstract expressionism was rooted in closed-eye vision, and I began consciously searching my own closed eyes for forms, shapes, areas that were related to de Kooning, as distinct from Pollock, and so on.

I was very centered on the American abstract expressionist movement. I was always interested in ineffable shapes that, if you were going to name them, would be biological rather than mathematical: shapes related to nerves, to cells, to the honeycomb of the bones, to the synapse system in the brain. Whether they were conscious of it or not, the abstract expressionists were always painting closed-eye vision, and I wanted to include that in film, since my impulse always was to include everything that you might *see* within the possibilities of filmmaking: closed-eye vision, daydreams, nightdreams, and so on.

The conventional sense of your connection with those painters has to do with your gestural camerawork as an echo of their gestural painting.
There *is* something to the concept of the gesture. And it certainly relates to Jackson Pollock. I had seen his ability to throw paint, and the intensity of that kind of gesture *was* inspiring to me, as it was to everyone else—and I think it does have a lot to do with my handheld camera. That plus newsreels: newsreels always looked more exciting to me when suddenly the camera would go off the tripod. There were a lot of other people, even in Hollywood movies, who were beginning to take the camera off the tripod and handhold it. The handheld camera wasn't an invention of mine, but I certainly augmented it.

One thing I *did* do and, until I started talking about it, I didn't know anyone else who did it, was to practice handholding the camera, with no film in it, for an hour or two a day—so the camera could become one with my body. It wasn't to increase control so much as to increase the possibilities of emoted feeling that might move through me into that camera when I was actually shooting. I wanted a degree of oneness with the camera. I didn't really think of that as gestural in

Fred Camper

Shadow of a potential suicide holding the rope, near the end of *Anticipation of the Night*.

the sense of hurling paint or anything like that. I think the connection with gestural painting is there, but easily exaggerated.

I have to confess that, as many times as I've seen Anticipation of the Night, *I cannot get my eyes off its textures and the colors and the rhythms; I cannot see the story. I know from reading Sitney's analysis that there is a story, about suicide. But every time I watch it, I just sit there thinking, "Wow, look at this! Look at that!" and then the film is over.*

The truth is, the story is very insignificant. In fact, it's a flawed story because, in the end, I *didn't* commit suicide—though, of course, I *had* thought about it. I'm glad I didn't commit suicide, but all the same, the film had come to a point where when my decision changed, the film could not re-realize itself in a new mode. Otherwise, the film *is,* as you suggest, visual music.

It's also true that music can be spoken of in terms of story. Some music lends itself more to that possibility: in Debussy's *La Mer,* there are the storms and the peaceful periods—that's a kind of story. There's even a story dimension in Beethoven: there are themes and, if you can think of the themes as characters, they have interrelationships with each other and then finally come to a resolution. I don't see anything wrong with thinking of film in much the same way.

The difference, of course, is that in music the sounds only rarely evoke with exactitude anything audible in the everyday, ordinary world, whereas with film, unless you're painting on film or working hard to achieve something completely nonobjective, you *are* involved in pictures of things that are nameable. *That's certainly clear in* Anticipation of the Night, *as compared with your early psychodramas, which move in a very particular direction.* Anticipation of the Night *can go where it wants.*

I wish I had known that when I was editing! I was so hung up that *this* was the end. Partly the idea of suicide gave me the bravery to do all kinds of things with film that at the time were considered absolutely monstrous. Who could even imagine such editing? You almost had to be tilted on the edge of death in order to . . . So I guess there's nothing terribly wrong that there's a hangman at the end of the film.

Scenes from Under Childhood

How did your theory of child vision develop? And to what extent was it a function of seeing your own children born and watching what they were experiencing as they grew?

It was very largely that. I was very involved with the children and, at one point early on, was horrified to realize that I was guilty of what I came to call the Shirley Temple syndrome: of finding them cute and thinking of their lives as bucolic and happier than mine—that is, not meeting them on the level of their own lives. And at that point I decided to start photographing them, because *that* enabled me to see more deeply into what they *were*. I had this sense in the back of my mind that a film might come out of it, but that was not the initial impulse. I wanted to *see* their world.

Now, I also understood that you can never really see inside another person's world; so at the same time that I'm looking at *them,* I'm remembering, as best I can, my own childhood. *Scenes from Under Childhood* arises out of a superimposition of those two things. My children were providing tender material, which I gathered; and as this material came into the camera though the lens (and later, during the editing process), my memories of my own childhood were sparked by their activities and in one way and another found *their* way into the films.

The catalogue description of Section 1 *mentions fetal beginnings. How fully are the four sections meant to represent a chronology? Were you thinking that* Part I *covers the transition from before birth to just after birth?*

Well, not exactly. *Section I* envisions fetal beginnings in the same way you might say something invokes something. And it seems a little odd, but you could say it is *me* remembering *them* remembering something of their fetal beginnings; or myself *imagining* them remembering fetal beginnings *and* also remembering

some sense of such a thing in myself. My feeling is—though I have no way to prove it—that children close to their births are actually remembering something of their life in the womb and the birth itself, whereas adults can only imagine it—though some adults do claim they have a sense of these experiences.

Are you also conjecturing that, especially in the final months of prenatal development, babies see in the same way that we have closed-eye vision?

Yes. What we call closed-eye vision is for me the template in the mind upon which all further formative envisionment is to occur. So there is an outside limit to human seeing which is implicit already in the womb. My sense of that is fortified by scientific experiments that have shown that there is rapid eye movement in fetus eyes, very similar to the REM movement of dreaming in adults—and children too, for that matter. The fetus can be said to dream, and it seems reasonable that very young children could be remembering something of their dreams in the womb.

When I've taught Scenes from Under Childhood, *I've usually suggested that the opening passages of* Section 1, *where we're just seeing colors—very bright reds and then increasing varieties of color—have to do with the eyes adjusting to the overwhelming reality of light. After the womb, the sun would be incredible, shocking. The color red that dominates those early moments of the film has always struck me as the same color I see when I look at the sun with my eyes closed.*
Yes. You've got exactly what I felt I was doing.

Some people have one child who keeps them in a state of exhaustion. You and Jane had five kids. And you were/are a prolific artist. How did you do it?
I'm going to find that very difficult to answer because I feel very exhausted at the moment, now that I'm having my second family with Marilyn. When you're younger, you have more of a mad, hormonal strength or even something more supernatural, like hordes of angels, helping to care for the children. Now that I'm older, it *is* very difficult, but for all that, I *do* still go on with my work, despite my age, despite two boys fussing, playing, and enjoying, but also scrapping with each other, despite my disabilities not only from age but also from the recent removal of my bladder and the chemotherapy I've just been through. I go on doing some making, however limited, and it turns out to be finally quite a lot, as always—more in fact than I can afford to process and print. So I suppose the answer for me is that I am just extraordinarily obsessed and didn't—and don't—have much, if any, choice in the matter.

I did have sort of a rule that my work area was off limits for the children. And I had a sensibility that let me distinguish quite accurately when children were shrieking in a game and when someone was in some kind of real trouble. But otherwise, I developed means to shut out the exterior world and be entirely concentrated on the filmmaking.

When I say these things, I'm talking mostly about the editing process. The photography, of course, was a direct engagement with the world of the children, and I think that's one of the reasons, perhaps the major reason, why so much of my work in that period was devoted to the children's world: not only *Scenes from Under Childhood,* but the *Sincerity* series [*Sincerity I* (1973), *Sincerity II* (1975), *Sincerity III* (1978), *Sincerity IV* (1980), *Sincerity V* (1980)] and a great many shorter films were integrally involved with family living, with the children growing up, with our immediate natural surroundings and the life within that house.

How did you and the family survive financially?
Well, I was very fortunate. Economically, I could never do the things I did then, now. First of all, when I started, film was incredibly inexpensive: about eight dollars a roll and maybe two or three dollars for processing Kodachrome. Now it's hard to get a roll done for less than sixty or seventy dollars.

It's just that there was always a way. First of all, there was a lot of money flowing through society, and this was post-World War II, when even the *trash* was excellent: you could live off of people's discards very easily, and I often did. Regardless of the economy, I know that I would probably have been obsessed and would have had to go on, but I would not have been able to make as many films. That may have been better! But it would have been totally different because in those days I had so much access. I had a Rockefeller grant for *Scenes from Under Childhood* that went on for years. When it was no longer available, I had to bring *Section 4* to an ending that was reasonable. Originally, *Section 4* wasn't to have been the end of *Scenes from Under Childhood*.

Did you finish Section 1 *before you did* Section 2 *and so forth? It looks to me as if* 2 *and* 3 *were done almost in tandem.*
Well, the same fund of material, which by this time had gotten to be five or six thousand feet of film, was being drawn on. In those days, unless something had a quality of envisionment that had been exhausted in earlier work, I would save it rather than throw it away. But essentially, the sections *are* chronological; they're trying to show the progressive growing up of the children.

The color range seemed to change: Section 2 *tends toward reds and* Section 3 *toward blues and greens. There also seemed to be other echoes between those two sections that aren't relevant in* Sections 3 *or* 4.
What you said about *Section 1*—that it traces a recognition of the subtleties of colors coming out of this reddish field, which is like closed-eye vision of the sun (plus what I call the remembrance of womb life)—distinguishes that section. If you remember, the baby in that section is in an almost fetal position created by the distorting glass through which she is photographed. And so all of *Section 1* is kind of a separating out of colors, a variety of colors, within this reddish field. Similarly, you could say that each successive section has certain biases of color, until you get to the fourth part, which has a wide spread of color—an increasing accent on color recognition.

Also in that fourth section, I come to a suggestion of the larger world, with the city scenes at the end, the baseball, the model airplane . . .

Is some of the city material in Section 4 *actual home movie material from your youth?*
No, but that's a wonderful compliment! I did shoot it as an adult, but, of course, the main drive of this film is to give that sense of time travel, as if I were drawing from the inside of my brain the styles and qualities of life of my growing-up period. Unconsciously I'm sure I was trying to exclude anything that might look too flashily up-to-date. The model airplane certainly *was* something that began to be a fashion when I was very young. Also, the scene where the two boys hold the little model cars they are playing with against their penises is a suggestion of transition to adult empowerment, both physically and mechanically. So there are all those suggestions that permit *Section 4* to provide a closure appropriate to *Scenes from Under Childhood*.

All of us have these drawers or boxes or scrapbooks full of photographs that were taken in our childhood. You could exchange our drawers or boxes and virtually nothing would change—the facial features would be different, but that's about it. And it's almost as though —I don't assume this is conscious on your part—the photographs you use in Scenes *are referencing the way family life was conventionally envisioned photographically as an implied comparison with the much more elaborate exploration of childhood that your film is offering.*
That's a nice thought. An interesting thing is that my grown children are not very involved in looking at the films.

Were they ever?
Not really. Filmmaking was a normal part of their growing up, a daily activity, and they'd look at the films as I finished them; but, all in all, they haven't shown much interest in their own photographed lives. Occasionally, they will ask to see the births, but otherwise they're not really interested—because, in a way, it isn't really *their* childhood. *They* are not remembering their childhood the way *I* was imagining it. The films confront them with *my* feelings about *my* own development, which they are only the occasion for.

And by the way, that was quite conscious. When I first started photographing, I got down on the floor and was rolling around with them with the camera, but I realized quickly that that was part of the Shirley Temple syndrome. You'll notice that, pretty consistently throughout *Scenes from Under Childhood,* the viewpoint is slightly above and looking down at the children, to keep that sense that this is *adult* envisionment, affected by the quality of the *maker's* childhood, coming through and coloring, shaping, twisting the forms into the production of an aesthetic.

When I began to take *Scenes from Under Childhood* on lecture tours, I noticed that college-age people have never cared for this work—maybe it's because they're still too close to it and *don't* want to remember. They're trying to climb up out of childhood. *Scenes from Under Childhood* stands *absolutely* against almost all envisionments of childhood, which are sugarcoated and nostalgic, and presented within a general aura that things were better then than they are now and that in childhood the soul was cleaner or purer.

My own sense of it is that to the children childhood is very hard, gruesome, often an utterly impossible world, just as adulthood is for adults. Children are in a state of almost constant terror, mixed with hysterical happiness, which can also turn to terror in an instant. They're grubby; and they sit sometimes as if in a haze (*Section 3* is just this haze of repetitive slight shifts of tones and color), for long, dull periods which people tend to connect with school, but which, in fact, are equally prevalent in home life. The fact is that very often there is nothing to do; everything is boring.

I think that most people would assume that what you mean by the slower passages—I mean all the way through the film—has to do with children being more perceptive of the specific phenomena around them, not that it's boring or terrifying.
But that's exactly what you *do* with boredom and terror. You sink into them; you begin to be aware of the

slight subtleties that are left in this monochromatic field. The only thing that can be done with the dull civilization we are now having, is to be fascinated by the endless riches of variance within the dullest, grayest field.

How fully was your filmmaking part of your relationship with Jane? For a lot of people, one person being a filmmaker and the other one not would become a bone of contention.
Well, she agreed early on to engage with this. A lot of people think, "Oh, how could I be so cruel to photograph my wife when she's crying in *Scenes from Under Childhood*?" But that was also a way of comforting Jane, of saying, "It's going to be all right; we'll turn this into gold, and everything else, the really bad times, the sadnesses, we'll turn them all into gold." The making *was* collaborative in that sense.

It was a process that Jane and I agreed to, and that Jane was very good for. I also tried to get the woman's view—what was specific to being a woman—into the films, during the editing process. Jane was advising me very often in that respect. In fact, Jane would grab the camera when I'd get angry and photograph *me* being angry, shaking my finger, just like she grabbed the camera right after giving birth to the first child in *Window Water Baby Moving*.

The Loom

The more I look at The Loom, *your film about the animal pen next to your house in the mountains, the more it strikes me as a major piece, loaded with thinking about the history of art and, in particular, the representation of animals in art. Graphically it suggests a tapestry, a Navajo rug; and it seems an homage to Muybridge*.
It *is* those things, but it's more consciously inspired by Georges Méliès.

You mean in its use of superimposition?
No. Let me explain. I had lived with these two windows—essentially it's two windows, plus a couple of others used here and there—and all those animals and all that animal motion for 15 years. The animals were penned in there, and that grid was put over the windows to keep them from breaking the window glass.

Over the years I came to have some sense of how the animals would move in relationship to each other. I could almost guess that, if goat A and goat B were here and there, and a rabbit came in from the lower left, unless a bird flopped down suddenly to change it, everything would tend to move in a certain way and come to another composition. I came to feel that, in a way, the animals were choreographing themselves, and that I could record something like the choreography in Georges Méliès's films, and, like him, with an unmoving camera. So that was my dream.

Compared to other films where you work with multileveled superimpositions, this imagery feels more frieze-like or tapestry-like.
Well, that's another way Méliès comes in. I've always felt that Méliès's sets are carrying on the tradition of Sienese paintings, as distinct from the Renaissance. As you know, Renaissance perspective has bothered me all my life, so I've been very partial to flats, which in fact is not just Méliès, but the tradition of the theater, where within a very small space a series of flats can be brought up and down to create a wide variety of scenes.

So I wanted that flatness, too, and I'm paying homage in every way I can to that flatness, including using telephoto lenses whenever I can get back far enough from the one window to do so. With the grid in front and the vertical logs in back, you have a great possibility for the animals being just like cardboard cut-outs—until they move, of course. When they move, they take on three dimensions. So that's how the loom comes into it; there's the grid and the sense of everything being a series of flats moving in relationship to each other.

Once you get into the flatness of the image, then the whole history of flat representation of animals seems to come into play, all the way back to the cave paintings.
Well, you know, I've not thought of that connection consciously in relationship to this film, and it's rather amazing that I haven't because, of course, the Lascaux cave paintings include those great animals with bodies very like the goats.

But I think you're right because the other film I was making at this time was *The Dante Quartet* [1987]. I was painting on IMAX film with very thick, half-an-inch thick, paint, *belts* of paint. I had no sense that the results could be printed or that I'd ever be able to show what I was doing, and I *was* thinking constantly of myself in relationship to Lascaux through all *that* process—because the cave painters chose invisibility. So unconsciously the cave paintings must have been a factor in what I was doing *downstairs* when I was photographing that yard.

The other thing that must be said is that *The Loom* was shot across a period where my marriage with Jane was grinding down, though I didn't know it while I was photographing. In fact, most of the editing was done right after the breakup. In the film there's this great grief and sadness, and a tribute to Jane and her "Peaceable Kingdom" of animals, which was alternately a burden and a joy to me.

I had made several films with the goats, including *Tragoedia* [1976], an aesthetic study of four generations of goats, which must be one of the most peculiar and least likely to be looked at films on earth, inasmuch as it really doesn't make it with the art crowd and *certainly* isn't going to make it with the goat crowd. "Tragoedia" meaning "goat cry." Did you know that the term "tragedy" comes from the cry of the goat?

Had no idea.
The sound they make, which of course does not occur in my film, was for the Greeks the saddest sound in the world.

Well, anyway, all that is especially relevant in *The Loom,* because when Jane is being pictured with the goat, since I've broken from her, this is tough stuff for me. At the time, I can't *imagine* how this has happened to us.

It's a lovely portrait of her.
But it must be said, after we talk about all these flattenings and all the aesthetics, that the weaving of that film is done amidst many tears and much grief and meditation. And all my wishes for a Peaceable Kingdom—which includes a film I made years ago in a zoo, called *The Peaceable Kingdom* [1971], and my involvement with Edward Hicks, another inspiration on *The Loom*—have come to grief. For all the beauty of the film, I also myself, more and more, began to sense that it was filled with a kind of tragedy of constriction.

That you're penned in as well as the animals.
After a certain amount of being penned in, you can open a door and people and creatures won't walk through it. But in the end I *had* to walk through, and shortly after, the whole yard was busted up and the animals were given away to different people. Homes were found for all of them, but that whole vision you see in *The Loom* is poised on the edge of being busted open into the world again. We were too much an idyll there, and it was freezing—first because it's eight months winter up there, but also in the other sense. We had come to a relationship that was no longer sustainable for Jane or me, or for the animals.

So *The Loom* is a meditation on all of that.

Commingled Containers

Why the title?
"Commingled Containers" is usually what we see on trash in Boulder, meaning we can put plastic and glass and aluminum cans in this receptacle and they will all be separated later for recycling. I'd just spent about a year fighting to be sure our apartment complex would have this recycling. I worked hard on that project so that term was in my mind, but I also thought that in conjunction with *Commingled Containers* it suggested a lot more than recycling.

You often talk about being in a trance state as you work, and I've heard you say that about this film. Could you talk specifically about how it got made?
It used to be that I had to go work very hard for several hours, sometimes several days, to get deeply enough into a trance so that I *could* work; and if I were called to the phone for something urgent, it took me up to 30 seconds to answer a question. The brain was coming up out of deep working concentration.

Sometimes I hesitate to use the word trance because of its cultish implications, but we've diluted the meaning of "concentration" and shifted it away from any spiritual accent. *This* kind of trance *is* one where you could hope to—expect to—meet angels and hear voices and listen for your cues in an envisionment of other dimensions.

Some of the people I know in the sciences have told me that there are well over a hundred dimensions. Usually, we're just barely considering the fourth. In my work process it is no surprise that there are over a hundred dimensions, and that "creatures" move through these dimensions—a cartoon word for whatever these entities are who are affecting the work. I do bar certain entities from moving through me because they are not of my kind and I cannot dance with them. I bar just exactly those that others (and I am not making a value judgment here), like Kenneth Anger or Harry Smith, can use very well and make a great, magnificent, powerful beauty from. These I don't work with.

I try to remain true to myself in what can move through me, in what can make use of the experience of life that *I* am and be in relationship with me. I don't feel like I *make* the films, but that they are made *through* me. The work is full of errors always, but those are mine. What's good about your work is *given*. What's giving it is what gives everything: for me, it's God.

In 1996, it was suspected that I had cancer and there was going to be an exploratory surgery, and just

before the exploratory surgery, I took out a camera I had recently bought. I don't know why I had that damned camera. I hadn't worked with a camera for several years at that point, didn't expect to work with one again: I simply could no longer afford to shoot film. I'd gone back to painting on film. But I'd seen this camera on sale, and it was a very good deal, and for some reason I'd bought it.

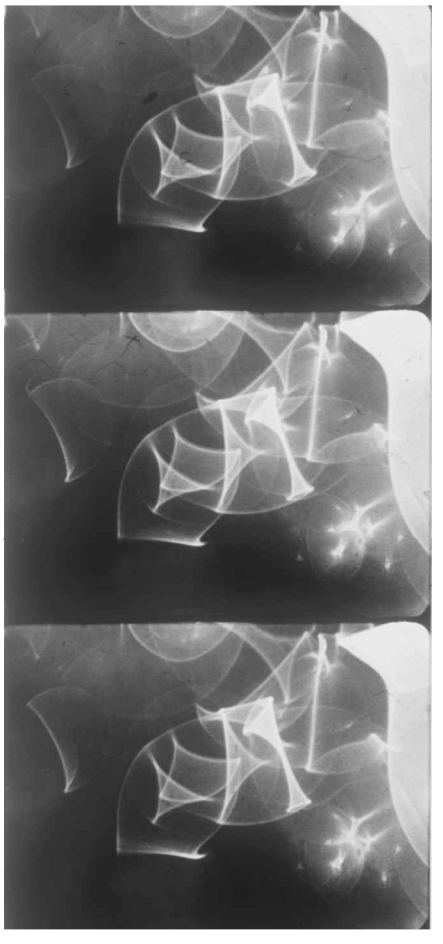
I knew I had to test the camera before the warranty ran out and I thought, "Well, Boulder Creek is always good for something." I went and sat down by the creek. Then I reached in my bag and I pulled out some extension tubes that I'd carried around since my father bought me movie equipment, in lieu of my going back to college. I'd never really been able to use them. I'd carried these tubes around for 35, 40 years, pulling them out every now and then and looking at them, and not throwing them away.

So, suddenly—who knows why—I pulled them out, put them on the camera and got myself macro, and stuck the lens partway into the water against some rock. I cannot tell you what moved me to do that. I didn't worry about whether I would get a particular image, but I also can't tell you how I'd get into a state where I *wouldn't* worry about that.

I won't say I don't know what I'm doing, but I *will* say that the whole point of being trained and adept with the camera, the whole point of craftsmanship, is that I can *work* this camera and wring it to do extraordinary things in a trance during which I cannot remember my name. This whole experience was an expression of what was tearing me up inside, which was, What's the point of checking out this camera? One, you don't intend to photograph anymore; it's become too expensive. Two, you're probably going to die (which is really what I thought). Why are you doing this? But then, on the other hand, if you're to die, what difference does it make if you have the right light reading on these goddamn tubes you've been carrying around all these years? Use them! And so there it was.

And all of that thinking is translating into: There's the *surface* of the water, which is like all the fussiness of our daily life; then right *under* that surface, visible because of the play across these rocks, is this very organic-feeling bubble-world, slowly evolving—you can't even really call them bubbles. They *are* bubbles—they're the result of friction of air and water—but they're all these different, extraordinary shapes that look organic in their fluidity of movement.

And deeper than that, there's something spiritual about them. I can't quite say what it is, but I'm certainly recognizing it, and there I am, sweating away over this stream with one foot in the water and the other knee on this rock and bent over and a long time passed—I think I was there about an hour and a half shooting very carefully. And when the roll came back from the lab, between the exploratory surgery and the removal of the bladder, I was so moved by it, and said, "O.K., this is my last film," and sat and edited it.



Light reflections in
Commingled Containers

I think every work should have, whatever one means by this term, something of God in it, so that you have a sense of the presence of the divine. And I think I share that feeling with artists of all kinds.

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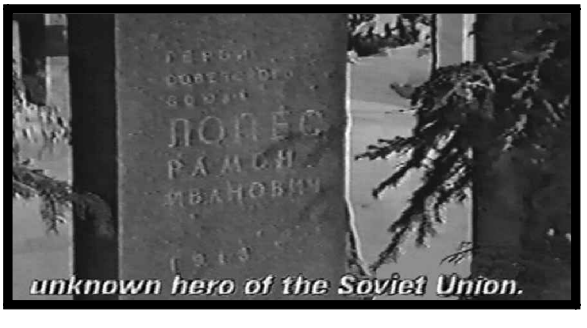
The films of Stan Brakhage are available from Canyon Cinema, 2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94720.

Marsha Kinder

Uncanny Visions of History

Two Experimental Documentaries from Transnational Spain— *Asaltar los cielos* and *Tren de sombras*

Guerin's static long takes capture anonymous strangers, animals, vehicles, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of frame.



Mercader was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

On November 8, 1930, Gérard Fleury (a Parisian lawyer who was also an amateur cinematographer) went out at dawn to capture the right light for filming the provincial landscape around Lake Thuit in Normandy. He disappeared later that same day under mysterious circumstances that have never been explained, and was presumed to be dead.

On August 20, 1940, Barcelona-born Stalinist Ramón Mercader del Rio, posing as Jacques Mornard, assassinated Leon Trotsky in Mexico by driving an ice pick into his brain. Mercader subsequently spent 20 years in a Mexican prison, and was finally buried in the Soviet Union under a tombstone marked "Ramón Ivanovich López."

Though radically different from each other, these historical events both took place in earlier decades in foreign nations outside Spain, and both involved a death that left many questions unanswered. The mysterious protagonists, both from families portrayed as emblematic of their era and locale, are the subjects of two fascinating feature-length documentaries made by Spanish filmmakers in the late 1990s: *Tren de sombras* (*Train of Shadows,* 1997), an evocative meditation on Fleury's silent home movies by Catalan experimental filmmaker José Luis Guerin; and *Asaltar los cielos* (*Storm the Skies,* 1996), a probing portrait of Trotsky's assassin codirected by cinematographer José Luis López Linares and journalist Javier Rioyo.

My interest here lies less in the actual events depicted in these films than in the ways in which these documentaries renarrativize their "uncanny" protagonists as postnational subjects who speak to the specific pressures of Spanish transnational filmmaking in the late 1990s. This exploration (which builds on my earlier essay, "Documenting the National and its Subver-

Film Quarterly, Vol. no. 56, Issue no. 3, pages 12-24. ISSN: 0015-1386.© 2003 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center Street, Suite 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

sion in a Democratic Spain") is part of a larger project on a group of Spanish documentaries of the 1990s that convey a transnational vision of Spain, a vision that looks not only forward to the new millennium, when an increasingly diversified Spain becomes a strong member of the European Union, but also backward, to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Barcelona and Catalan culture were cosmopolitan sites for daring internationalist projects.[1] These films suggest that Spain, despite its long nationalist history of self-imposed hermetic isolation and continuing marginalization, still has a great deal to teach the rest of the world about the transnational or postnational condition.

In an essay on fetishism, Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of the old and long familiar"—a fear that he ultimately traced back to the boy child's experience of seeing the mother's genitals, and the castration anxiety and turn toward fetishism which that vision aroused.[2] Though neither *Tren de sombras* nor *Asaltar los cielos* invites a psychoanalytic reading, they both link an uncanny death from the past to a present fear of powerlessness and obliteration, or a fear of being condemned to silence and obscurity. Significantly, both films document events that occurred in earlier decades, before Spain (and more specifically Catalan culture) was hermetically sealed and isolated under Franco's monolithically nationalist regime. Both events took place in nations with whom Spain has long had strategic transnational cultural relations. In the case of *Tren* it is France, whose cultural affinities cosmopolitan Catalonians have long used to assert their independence from the rest of Spain; in the case of *Asaltar* it is Russia, whose shifting relations with Spain (as both ally and arch enemy) helped complicate the deep polarization between the "two Spains," and Mexico, with which Spain has had complex linguistic, colonialist, and diasporic ties for centuries.

Both films suggest that the full resonance of these uncanny events can be understood only if one engages in a process of narrative investigation that Spanish filmmakers appear uniquely qualified to perform at this particular stage of transnational history. For Spain's contradictory relations to marginality have enabled it to more easily convert that limitation into an asset—a dynamic that has helped recent Spanish filmmakers broker the representation of the alien Other both inside and outside of Spain. While Spanish authorities in several periods vigorously suppressed, denied, or marginalized cultural difference (usually justified in the name of religious orthodoxy, moral purity, national unity, social order, or economic necessity), this process helped marginalize Spain itself within the larger international arena. As a Catalan filmmaker working within a region and genre that are both highly marginal in world cinema, Guerin purposely seeks out marginal subjects in other European nations for his unconventional documentaries. Marginality itself becomes his subject. In contrast, madrileños López Linares and Rioyo use the marginalized Catalan identity disavowed by Mercader and his mother to help account for their fanatical nomadic subjectivity as postnational world revolutionaries.

Spain's experience of having been hermetically sealed for decades under the Franco regime means that a great deal of its role in history is still unknown both to Spaniards and to the rest of the world. For Spaniards, this has led to an obsession with memory, particularly in mining the gaps between authorized versions of collective history (especially in those hated government-sponsored Noticias Documentales, or "NO DO" newsreels, that had a monopoly on archival footage of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, on its narrativization through editing, and on its distribution as the official "truth") and the more anarchic collections of personal memories recorded in a wide array of popular forms that trigger uncensored private associations with subversive potential. This struggle over popular memory was central to the structure of several powerful anti-Francoist documentaries from the transitional era of the mid-1970s, such as Basilio Martín Patino's *Canciones para después de una guerra* (*Songs for after a War,* 1971, released in 1976), Jaime Chávarri's *El desencanto* (*Disenchantment,* 1976), Gonzalo Heralde's *Raza, el espíritu de Franco* (*Race, the Spirit of Franco,* 1977), and Jaime Camino's *La vieja memoria* (*Old Memories,* 1977). The ideological conflict was played out not only through the selection of images and sounds, but also through the different editing styles, which resulted in very different ways of narrativizing these recorded perceptions. This desire to unearth lost records of idiosyncratic personal memory and to find new ways of recontextualizing them is what also drives both Guerin's obsessive examination of the fragile remnants of Fleury's home movies in *Tren de sombras* and Rioyo and López Linares' recounting of Ramón Mercader's strange story in *Asaltar los cielos*.

Both films emphasize the transcultural nature of their inquiries as they pursue their archeological projects, excavating traces of a history that is on the verge of being lost. In this sense, they both fall within the category of what Laura U. Marks calls "intercultural cinema"—films which operate at the intersections of

two or more cultural regimes of knowledge so that meaningful knowledge can never be fully verified solely in the terms of one regime or the other. Marks claims that such works are frequently acts of excavation that are primarily deconstructive.

> Yet once this deconstruction has been accomplished, no simple truth is uncovered. There is a moment of suspension that occurs in these works after the official discourse has been (if only momentarily) dismantled and before the emerging discourse finds its voice. This is a moment of silence, an act of mourning for the terrible fact that the histories that are lost are lost for good. Yet this moment is also enormously suggestive and productive. It is where these works begin to call upon other forms of cultural knowledge: it is where the knowledges embedded in fetish-like objects, bodily memory, and the memory of the senses . . . are found.[3]

It is precisely those silences that are mined so productively by these two Spanish documentaries of the 1990s.

For non-Spaniards, an unearthing of Spain's previously hidden role in international politics could potentially change the understanding not only of Spain but also of world history, particularly in its transnational phase—which is precisely what *Asaltar* demonstrates in its study of Ramón Mercader, for it renarrativizes his act of terror for the 1990s. The film suggests that only by understanding the story of Spain's complex role in the Trotsky assassination can one fully comprehend the recent fall of the Soviet Union and the construction of the post-Cold War, postnational era of the 1990s.

Asaltar los cielos

This fascinating documentary opens quite conventionally, with a pre-titles teaser introducing four of the many historical witnesses who will be interviewed throughout the film: Ramón's adopted Mexican daughter, Laura Mercader, who still doesn't understand her father's motives; Russian exile Elena Poniatowska, who is horrified that he was capable of stabbing someone with a knife from behind; his Spanish nephew, Gay Mercader, a concert promoter who takes an ironic stance toward his family's notoriety; and his aunt María, the widow of Italian filmmaker Vittorio De Sica (a major influence on Spanish cinema) and a former actress during the Neorealist era, who disavows any connection with Ramón. All four, in fact, seem to have little insight to offer about the assassin and his deed. What this montage of talking heads does provide are quick links between Mercader and four different cultural regimes and nations (Mexico, Russia, Spain, and Italy), yet it is directly followed by a shift to Catalan specificity when we see archival footage of Barcelona at the turn of the century playing behind the opening credits.

While this juxtaposition is still consistent with the compilation documentaries from the transitional era with their dialogic clashes between official public history and contradictory private memories, *Asaltar* departs from its predecessors when we suddenly see footage of the 1976 Rolling Stones concert in Barcelona, with the androgynous Mick Jagger prancing on stage as Spanish film star Charo López tells us in voiceover that these two dates, 1900 and 1976, mark the span of Ramón's life. Although the specific date of Mercader's death makes another historical connection with the transition, the choice of the Stones concert as historical marker introduces a vision of Spain that is more compatible with the postmodernist documentaries of the mid-1990s than with the transitional documentaries of the mid-1970s. For the concert associates Mercader not only with the end of Francoist xenophobia, but also with Spain's immersion in a sexually mobile global pop culture. In a special issue of the Spanish film journal *Viridiana* devoted to *Asaltar los cielos* and Patricio Guzmán's documentary *La memoria obstinada* (1997), Rioyo and López Linares acknowledge this connection in their preface:

> The mixture of archival images, black-and-white and color footage, 16mm film, digital video, Super 8, photographs, interviews, audio, united in a visual and sound montage, makes the telling of this history effective and accessible. We are addressing spectators of ARTE and of MTV with a model of audiovisual ideas that reflect modern concepts of how to look at cultural facts, documents, or music.[4]

Asaltar combines processed archival footage and a complex weave of interviews with a wide range of historical witnesses from a broad geographical range. They all had some direct connection with the film's three major characters, who were born in different nations: Mercader in Spain; his mother Caridad del Río in Cuba; and his victim, Trotsky, in Russia. The historical witnesses include journalists, scholars, and political activists of various nationalities and ideological persuasions, as well as surviving relatives and

friends of both the assassin and his victim, including several of Trotsky's bodyguards and one of Mercader's fellow prisoners in the Mexican jail. There are also occasional star cameos, like the brief interview with Sara Montiel (the leftist Spanish movie queen who met Mercader in Mexico). Yet the most famous "stars" in the story—Stalin, La Pasionaria, Diego Rivera (who convinced Mexican President Lázaro Cardenas to grant Trotsky a visa), Frida Kahlo (who had an affair with him), David Siquieiros (who tried to assassinate him)—are, like the protagonist and victim, all dead. They are ghosts who appear only in archival footage and whose direct testimonies are irretrievably lost, like those of Trotsky and Mercader.

Asaltar tells the story of an eccentric family that, as one of the film's witnesses tells us, "embodies the contradictions of the century." The Del Río-Mercaders are not a Francoist family hermetically sealed within Spain, but one of nomadic subjectivity. Hence the story ranges freely from Havana to Barcelona, Madrid, Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, New York, and Mexico City. Breaking from the familiar cliché that treats the Spanish Civil War as a micro-event, a dress rehearsal for the ideological struggles of World War II, the film suggests that Spain has always been a major player in world politics, yet one whose identity (like Ramón's) was disavowed and disguised.

The film focuses on the relationship between a strong mother and her sons, whose lives, talents, and subjectivities she shaped (or warped, depending on your ideological point of view). Like many Spanish fictional films of the 1990s, especially those representing the complex political struggles of the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War, *Asaltar* emphasizes the crucial role played by women in these historic conflicts. Ramón's fanatical Stalinist mother, Caridad del Río Mercader, is consistently criticized by veteran anarchist Teresa Palou and contrasted with Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria), who appears much less extreme. La Pasionaria emerges as the ideal Communist heroine, the model for cute little girls who are shown masquerading as their idol, while Caridad (like her son) is portrayed as a secretive killer performing Stalin's dirty work behind the scenes—a character, according to Rioyo and López Linares, whose life "seems taken out of a Greek tragedy."[5]

After the introduction, the film actually begins with the story of the fiercely independent Caridad, a focus that strengthens the uncanniness of Ramón's historic moves by suggesting that what is most mysterious in his motives is traceable back to his mother and her own fears of powerlessness. What is most striking in this introduction to Caridad is the uncanny experience imposed on her by her rich Catholic Catalan husband: she was dragged to a Barcelona brothel and forced to watch how other women perform sexually. It is not clear whether he hoped she would learn new sexual tricks or merely be convinced that female sexuality was designed to serve male pleasure. In either event, what we see in the archival footage are two mammoth nude women striking poses that are more comic than erotic, but that also, like the glam voguing of Mick Jagger in the 1976 concert footage, suggest a potentially subversive homoerotic sexual mobility. The film implies that this uncanny vision horrified Caridad and helped drive her and her brood (and possibly the filmmakers as well) to seek empowerment in some arena other than sexuality, which became, with considerable help from the global success of Pedro Almodóvar's comic melodramas, the new libertarian stereotype of Spain under the Socialists.

Not interested in sex (or so her surviving son, Luis, Ramón's youngest brother, tells us—though sons are rarely reliable sources on their mother's sexuality), Caridad devoted all her energies to politics. We are also told she demonstrated against factories owned by her own family, which led them to confine her in an insane asylum (from which her sons helped her escape). Thus, as a world revolutionary, she struggled against the historically divided nation ("the two Spains") and the patriarchal bourgeois family (enshrined by Church, Franco, Freud, and melodrama), scattering her brood across the world. This remarkable story is told as an account not of a uniquely eccentric woman but of one whose life was shaped by cultural and historical specificity: the radical and internationalist atmosphere of Barcelona and the complex political struggles at play during the Republic and the subsequent Civil War.

The first five minutes of the film thus present us with an array not only of transnational associations but

A representation of the Barcelona brothel where Caridad was forced to watch other women perform.

also of possible primary subjects—the story of a man, woman, family, city, trauma, century—all fraught with troubling contradictions and all inextricably entangled within a complex narrative network that can be read against various conflicting cultural regimes of knowledge. Documentary is seen as the only genre capable of telling such a complicated story, a form that is sufficiently heteroglossic to incorporate a combination of other genres (including city symphony, rock documentary, melodrama, and porn) and an equally dense mélange of styles. As the codirectors put it in describing how they tried to appeal to the postmodernist, postnational spectators of ARTE and of MTV: "The documentary is a narrative form increasing in value. It has a new aesthetic language we are eager to explore."[6]

One way into the narrative network is through the exile experience of Ramón, whose story is contextualized historically against those Spanish "war children" whom we see in archival footage being sent to the Soviet Union (or to France) by their Communist parents for a few months so that they could escape the dangerous air raids, but who ended up staying for many years. (This is the Spanish version of the story told in Mark Jonathan Harris's Oscar-winning *Into the Arms of Strangers: The Story of the Kinder Transport,* [2000].) We hear from their testimony how, although welcomed by the Soviet population and very well treated, they were deprived of mother love and homeland and transformed into permanent postnational exiles. As one of them expresses it movingly in an interview, in the USSR they were always seen as Spanish and in Spain they were always seen as Russian.

It was actually Luis who experienced this uncanny postnational fate shared by many other Spaniards, for Ramón was singled out by his mother for a unique political mission that required him to go to the Soviet Union in 1937 to be trained as a KGB spy and to shed his Spanish and Catalan identities. We are told that their relationship was not primarily mother/son but political comrades, as if they believed in their own individual power to escape those ordinary ties of blood, biology, and nationality—even if only to serve a larger, imperialist supranational master narrative of international Communism. Since we never get direct access to the subjectivity of either of them, these characterizations remain as mediated as the juxtaposition of word and image or the editing of the archival documents. We are told that as a fanatic, Caridad could always justify each new revelation about Stalinism, and yet because of her fiercely independent nature, she chose to live in Paris rather than Moscow. Luis claims she blamed herself for ruining Ramón's life and was suicidal as a consequence, and that her intervention in Mexico to help him escape from prison inadvertently extended Ramón's sentence, forcing him to serve the full 20 years instead of only four, as certain Mexican officials had secretly agreed. So this is also the story of a tormented mother/son relationship, which echoes similar relations in other Spanish films, yet *Asaltar* purposely discourages a psychoanalytic or melodramatic reading.

Nevertheless, Ramón's relationships with women are emphasized throughout the film: not only the formative relationship with his mother, but also the complex relations with his lover Sylvia, a New York Jew and loyal Trotskyist whom he exploited and betrayed by living with her in Paris and New York for a number of years solely in order to gain access to Trotsky. While his Mexican wife (a dancer he met in prison) remains vaguely defined, his adopted daughter defends him, claiming that because he spent 20 years in prison, her loss was as great as that of Trotsky's family. Within both families, domestic relations were readily sacrificed for revolutionary politics, for both assassin and victim insisted that their lives belonged to a different cultural paradigm.

Spanish "war children" sent to the Soviet Union for a few months to escape the dangerous air raids ended up staying for many years.

The mystery of Ramón's identity is linked in the film with his nomadic subjectivity: his mastery of several languages (he spoke impeccable French and perfect American English, but allegedly never said a word in Spanish) and his possession of several different names, passports, and nationalities. The goal of this film, like that of the new marker on his grave (seen in a fetishized close shot) is to restore a complex Catalan identity to Mercader. That is, to reterritorialize him as a world revolutionary from a cosmopolitan Spain and to fill that historical "twenty years of silence" with an orchestration of international voices that define his complex determinations and deeds. Yet, as Marks has argued, it is the silence that makes such an orchestration possible.

One rupture of that silence is Trotsky's final piercing scream, which Mercader heard when he drove the ice pick into his brain and which apparently haunted him the rest of his life. This obsession suggests not only that Mercader may have felt remorse, but also that this scream may have provided some solace from the silence imposed on him—by the KGB, who suppressed his identity; by Trotsky, who totally underestimated him; by the torturers in prison, who tried to make him talk; and subsequently by history, which tried to erase his identity. Ironically, he suffered a fate similar to that of his victim, whom Stalin tried to banish from the stage of history. Thus Trotsky's uncanny scream is presented as an outcry against historical erasure, which this film tries to rectify for both the assassin and his victim. This rescue mission has special resonance in the late 1990s, for who could be a more complex poster child than Mercader for a postnational Spanish identity—the unknown Spaniard who changed the course of history (by eliminating Stalin's arch rival), and whose deed has become even more resonant with the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of transnational capitalism in the post-Soviet, post-Cold War era of the 1990s and beyond?

Still, the film ends by suggesting that Mercader may have had a nostalgic yearning for his lost national identity. According to one witness, Ramón wondered what if he had never left Spain—or what if after serving his sentence he had returned to Spain (instead of to Cuba or the Soviet Union) to spend his remaining 15 years on one of those edenic beaches on the Costa Brava? In one of its finest ironic disjunctures between word and image, the film ends by showing us a beach swarming with anonymous tourists. As if that were not sufficiently bathetic, we see a close shot of the corpulent derrière of a female tourist disappearing into the sea, an image as comically deflating, misogynist, and uncanny as the earlier shots of those rotund prostitutes in the Barcelona brothel. This bathetic image not only de-eroticizes the false paradise being promoted as a nationalist object of desire, it also makes us question the interpretation (voiced by several witnesses) that Ramón's life was wasted. Perhaps this ending implies that, regardless of how duped, deprived, or denationalized the Mercaders (and for that matter, Trotsky) may have been, life as a quixotic political idealist on the global stage of world revolution was still preferable to these mundane pleasures in a transnational consumerist Spain.

Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit

In comparison to *Asaltar los cielos, Tren de sombras* seems precious, poetic, and painterly rather than explicitly political, and its narrative pleasures are intellectual and contemplative rather than historically and psychologically compelling. Yet the film still serves similar drives. For though Fleury's mysterious death is not momentous like Trotsky's, the film suggests its historic ramifications can best be understood by a Catalan subject who fully appreciates the power of marginality and who questions the notion of authenticity within the local/global nexus of a postnational Europe.

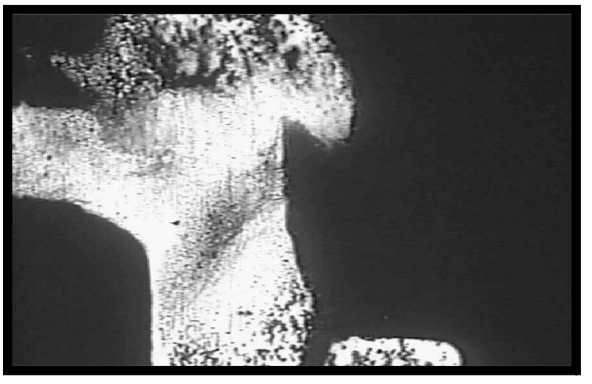
While both films privilege editing as the ultimate process of making meaning, their challenges are completely different. *Asaltar* organizes a massive array of diverse archival materials into a coherent, accessible story without sacrificing its complexity. *Tren* marshals a diverse series of layered contexts and complex reconstructions for recuperating and reinterpreting scant filmic remnants ravaged by decay, and shows how this found footage can be recontextualized within several regimes of knowledge to generate very different kinds of meaning about the mysterious disappearance of the auteur, the cultural and historical specificity of this particular region of France, the materiality and fragility of the film medium, the respective values of film preservation and historical reconstruction, the history of European silent cinema, the nature of memory and history, and the permeability of boundaries between genres and all other bordered domains, including documentary and fiction.

Both documentaries can be read as database narratives that reveal the linked processes of selection and combination which give new meaning to perceptions and history, and both employ a search engine that generates a diverse combination of stories. Or, in Laura Marks's terms, as archeological projects, they both express "the disjunction between orders of knowledge,

such as official history and private memory, by juxtaposing different orders of image, or image and sound tracks that do not correspond to each other."[7] Both films also belong to what Gilles Deleuze has defined as "time-image cinema," a category that Marks tries to imbue with cultural and historical specificity by identifying it with "intercultural" cinema. In forcing "the viewer to draw upon his or her subjective resources in order to complete the image," Marks claims the intercultural version presents the image as "barely a beginning, and any extension into narrative must be hesitant, or suspicious. In these works, thin-looking images are ultimately the richest . . . [for they] call on the viewer to search for their hidden history."[8] This is precisely the primary strategy in *Tren de sombras,* whose mysterious and decaying images evoke tentative narratives that are sheer projection and whose "petrified objects" are brought back to life and fetishized through repetitive restaging and reframing.

In *Tren*'s pre-titles teaser, we are confronted with abstract blotches whose meanings depend on how we contextualize them generically. On the one hand, we can read them as abstract expressionist images that offer sensory painterly pleasures. We can also see them as celluloid frames from film footage in the process of decay, which reminds us of the materiality of the medium (a frequent preoccupation with a certain mode of experimental cinema associated with filmmakers like James Benning and Pat O'Neill). Purely aesthetically, these blotches call our attention to figure/ground relations and resonate with the recurring patterns of lace, grillwork, and shadows that similarly layer and texture Guerin's contemporary color footage of interiors. But when these blotches are eventually associated with the deteriorating footage on which we recognize filmic representations of people from an earlier era, we reinterpret them as signs of the film's historic authenticity. At that point they become part of the general thematic around issues of loss, temporality, disappearance, and death.

On the other hand, these blotches also function as obstacles or even as a means of censoring certain readings of a gradually unfolding melodramatic narrative. Centering on a complex network of erotic relations within the family, melodrama cuts across many periods, cultures, and media, and can even be found in fragmented home movies. The ubiquitous nature of melodrama and its hybridization with so many other genres make it an effective pattern against which to read and make sense out of fragmented or incoherent story materials. Guerin demonstrates (with his ever-changing soundtracks) how the generic tone of Fleury's



These blotches can be read either as processed, painterly images evoking abstract expressionism, or film footage in the process of decay.

amateur form of melodrama can shift fluidly from domestic comedy to psychological thriller depending on the accompanying music or silence. We see how genre contextualizes the meaning of images and sounds, and that all generic options foregrounded by Guerin—melodrama, mystery-detection, documentary, art film, and historical reconstruction—can be applied to any movie. He employs genres the way he uses music, as a database of alternatives that alter the meaning of perceptions and that call attention to how we actually read the combination of sounds, images, and words.

When we see the bright blue graphics of the opening titles (*Tren de sombras: El espectro de Le Thuit*), these few words (in this basically wordless film)[9] begin to contextualize the images and sounds that follow. *Sombras* (shadows) and *espectro* (specter) bring to mind the light, shadow, vision, and spectacle that are central to a reflexive meta-commentary on film, but they also evoke the ghosts, death, disappearance, and time that are frequently crucial in melodrama. Both domains (of experimental film and melodrama) are motored by the opening word, *Tren,* which sets in motion the train of images and sounds pulsing rhythmically through human minds and cinematic machines as well as the narrative drive that enables us to interpret these sensory perceptions as highly textured, multilayered stories. In fact, the first human figures we see (behind the blotches) are waving goodbye to a train, an association underscored by a train whistle emerging from the edgy music.

An explanatory title in Spanish, more suggestive than definitive, tells us that the film is set in Le Thuit, in Upper Normandy. Some spectators might associate this region with those French literary masters of family melodrama, Flaubert (who was born in Rouen) and Proust (who used to summer in Cabourg, which he de-

picted as Balbec).[10] This text also describes the collaborative relationship between *Tren*'s more obscure regional filmmakers, Fleury and Guerin:

> Three months before [Fleury's death] he made one of his modest family productions, which would turn out to be his last film. Inadequately preserved for almost seven decades, it has been rendered almost irretrievable by the harmful effects of humidity, making its projection impossible. Starting from some photographs, we have tried to remake it; we have refilmed it all over again. Adhering to the criterion of maximum fidelity, we have recreated the original circumstances, reconstructing locations and scrupulously reproducing gestures, framings, and movements.
>
> The first few minutes give an account of this labor. It would have been unthinkable without the complicity of the brothers Ives and Mireille Fleury to whom we are indebted with most sincere gratitude, which also extends to the Laquest, Gauthier and Ferri de Le Thuit families for their most valuable collaboration on the restoration of these old scenes of familial cinema: images which may be rudimentary but which are vital to remembering the infancy of cinema.

In the post-titles teaser that dramatizes the film's reconstructive "labor," the music disappears and we see a series of black-and-white photographs that remind us not only that cinema grew out of photography, but also how quickly the sequencing of still images begins to generate narrative. First, we see a close-up of a man smiling (whom we probably take to be Fleury), then a two-shot of him and his wife in which he is no longer smiling. The juxtaposition makes us wonder whether we are to infer an unhappy marriage—a question that launches the melodrama. Then follows a framed photograph of Fleury standing alone beside a lake near his boat, holding his camera, which suggests the actions he was presumably performing the day he disappeared. The image dissolves to a shot of that same photograph recontextualized within a richly furnished room, suggesting a broader subject of a specific family, class, region, and historical era. Yet the attention to light and shadow also encourages us to read the image as a painterly still life. The next dissolve takes us to a deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside a tripod on which his camera is mounted, the physical deterioration of the image evoking the loss both of his films and his life. The music resumes as the

The deteriorating photo of Fleury standing beside his tripod evokes the loss of both his films and his life.

next dissolve reveals a color image of what looks like the same man standing by the lake, an image which we could read as an uncanny modern replication of the earlier "authentic" photograph. Ducks glide gracefully across the lake and water subtly ripples near the boat as ambient sounds merge with the music.

There are three ways in which this shot makes us question what we have already perceived. First, how do we know that what we presumed to be the earlier authentic photographs were not also contemporary images made to look old through these artificial signs of deterioration? In other words, how do we know this so-called documentary is not a hoax, like *The Blair Witch Project*? Secondly, do we know that what we previously saw were still images, or were they merely static long takes of photographs? Finally, are we sure there was really silence, or were the sounds merely below the threshold of our attention or hearing? The grounds of our perceptions and assumptions are called into question by these simple juxtapositions in these so-called thin images, which generate all sorts of new and probing questions about the medium and the melodrama.

At this point the man disappears from the scene and there is a dissolve to the boat alone, an image which gradually fades to black. But the moon (or is it the sun?) and its reflection in the water remain clearly visible, making us wonder whether these are really authentic natural bodies as we assumed, or merely circles of light digitally inserted into the image. This shot demonstrates how easily images, sounds, and lights are manipulated—a realization that weakens any remaining belief in the boundaries between the so-called authentic footage and the historical recreation, between documentary and fiction, between Fleury and Guerin. The very act of obsessive scrutiny makes the fetishized object of scrutiny all the more uncanny and obscure: it

becomes a mere reflection, image, sign, substitution—like any fetish.

At some point in the film we probably wonder why a Barcelona-born experimental filmmaker like Guerin should be interested in making a film about this obscure French subject, particularly if he is interested in reaching a European or global audience. Perhaps there is something wrong with this question, for why shouldn't other regions or nations be able to make films about "foreign" subjects? Why should they be expected to make only national allegories about their own locales while Hollywood freely colonizes the rest of the world for subjects? This issue has been a sore point for both Spanish and Catalan cinema, for both have historically been marginalized in world cinema. Perhaps the connection between Catalonia and the Thuit region of France makes more sense in the new macro-regional context of a transnational European cinema, where the nation is under erasure. At one point in the film we even see a map marked "Euro," just as we literally see signs pointing to nearby cities such as Rouen. There is no mention of nations.

In the frequent crosscutting between the reconstructions of the apparently historic black-and-white or sepia footage and Guerin's contemporary color footage of the same locales, what is blatantly obvious are the historical differences in the way this same space is documented within these two allegedly distinct time periods. The comparison does not evoke nostalgia or judgment; rather, it calls our attention to the differences in the ordinary daily activity occurring in that space and being captured or reconstructed on celluloid. While the apparently historic footage records a complex network of erotic relations within an extended bourgeois family (the kind that Foucault has theorized and that Caridad del Río Mercader was escaping), Guerin's contemporary static long takes capture anonymous strangers, sheep, cars, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of the frame. And while the former raises provocative narrative questions about the characters and their adulterous relations, the latter move us with the sheer beauty of the crisp images and lighting. They are both compelling, but in very different ways, for they must be read against different cultural regimes of knowledge and pleasure.

At certain points in the contemporary footage, Guerin presents a blatant historical reconstruction of the earlier period (a technique also used in his 1990 documentary, *Innisfree*). Casting contemporary locals to reproduce the historic subjects, he succeeds exceptionally well with the simulacrum for Hortense, the young woman with whom Fleury and his brother Etienne were possibly erotically obsessed (or at least that is what Guerin's film leads us to suspect). But when we see several of the characters from the so-called historic footage appear, we are reminded that the alleged original is also a reconstruction, and that the contemporary simulation (however stagy and artificial) is the more honest. We begin to wonder what portion of this footage or photographs, if any, was actually remnants shot by Fleury, and even whether this French filmmaker is truly a historical figure or merely a fictional character invented by Guerin. Ironically, the more accurate the historical reconstruction, the weaker the boundary between the so-called original film being preserved and the docudrama that seeks to reproduce it. This uncanny resemblance, triggered by the recognition of a woman from the past, threatens the symbolic order and all its restrictive boundaries. How paradoxical that this challenge of authenticity occurs in a film that appears to celebrate "the small scale and the local . . . [as] the places of greatest integrity . . . in the age of global flows and networks" (to use Jean Franco's terms),[11] for this challenge undermines any attempt to essentialize or idealize the local.

Similarly, even though this is allegedly a film about one auteur recuperating another, and even though we see at least two cameramen—Fleury and "Uncle Etienne"—the auteur's identity still remains as elusive as that of Ramón Mercader. The two on-screen men with a camera evoke the historic French binary between Lumière and Méliès, with Fleury as an active figure striding across the landscape with his camera mounted on a tripod (like Vertov's "man with a movie camera") to document the same kinds of subjects found in the Lumière brothers' early *actualités* (including the dramatic presence of a train, and a domestic prank with a garden hose). In contrast, his mustached rival uses Méliès's theatrical-type magic to make himself and other figures disappear. The film enables us to see that we are never really certain who has authored the image: Fleury or Guerin, or any of the film's many intertexts from world cinema: Lumière, Vertov, Méliès, Buñuel, Marker, Antonioni.[12]

In the global context, *Tren de sombras* can be compared with *The Blair Witch Project,* another faux documentary built around footage allegedly left by filmmakers who died under mysterious circumstances. As a low-budget American independent, *The Blair Witch Project* was as potentially marginal as *Tren de sombras,* yet its innovative use of the Internet enabled it to achieve a totally unexpected commercial success (duly noted by the Hollywood establishment), and the film thereby challenged many reigning assumptions

about marginality. Perhaps this surprising success even suggests that the present form of cinema itself may soon be peripheral. At one point in *Tren de sombras* we see a poster marked "Mémoires du Cinéma" in the foreground, with a man sweeping trash in mid-ground and a cemetery in the background, and a line of young schoolchildren and cars passing through this space, apparently indifferent to the loss. We know that there has been a widespread closing down of old theaters in smaller towns throughout Europe—a process memorialized with sentiment in *Cinema Paradiso*.

Tren avoids such sentimentality. Instead, like *The Blair Witch Project,* it leads us to consider how cinema can be reimagined through a convergence with new media, a restructuring process that is particularly reflected in its innovative approach to editing (the way it restructures the "train" of images) and that is analogous to the restructuring of communities (evoked in the contrast between Fleury's home movies structured around the family and Guerin's contemporary footage of anonymous strangers). A similar analogy is made to train travel—an image with great resonance for documentary cinema because of its historic associations with the early Lumière *actualités*. Guerin evokes the comparison with trains not only in the film's opening teaser and title, but also with a comparison between fragile images of the Fleury family waving at a passing train and contemporary shots of abandoned train tracks overgrown with weeds. Yet the success of high-speed trains in Europe and Japan has extended the life of this earlier form of transportation. Similarly, *Tren de sombras* shows how vintage cinema can function as a viable engine for expanding the kinds of interactive narrative that are usually associated with new digital media and hypertexts.

In the current context of media history, film is fragile not only because celluloid and nitrate deteriorate when exposed to humidity, but also because backers of new media rivals like video, CD-ROMs, the Internet, DVD, and interactive television are trying to absorb or replace it. Amazingly, at the same time that *Tren de sombras* demonstrates the unique visual power of cinema, its innovative stylistics also expand our conception of interactive narrative and its potential pleasures far more powerfully than do most of these new digital media.

In fact, *Tren de sombras* is one of several experimental nonlinear European films from the 1990s that enable us to imagine new modes of interactive spectatorship through expanded forms of montage, database structures, and simulations of randomness—a combination which generates new narrative pleasures. Such films include European coproductions like Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World,* Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book,* Chris Marker's *Level 5,* Raul Ruiz's *The Shattered Image,* Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run,* Mike Figgis's *Time Code* and *Hotel,* Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*; and from Spain, Bigas Luna's *The Chambermaid on the Titanic,* Julio Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle,* and Alejandro Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (remade in Hollywood as *Vanilla Sky*). It is as if such films were designed to ensure that Hollywood action films like *The Matrix* do not totally dominate the emerging transmedia convergence between movies and interactive games. Thus, the narrative experimentation potentially has economic as well as aesthetic implications, particularly within a transnational market still dominated by Hollywood exports.[13]

Except for his most recent documentary feature, *En construcción (Work in Progress,* 2001), Guerin's films have not proved successful at the box office (even within Spain), yet they still expand the formal and conceptual possibilities of the medium. In *Tren de sombras* he frequently replays the same footage but with varied soundtracks—a strategy that brings to mind Genette's point that all repetition is a mental construction; no repetition is identical, for some elements of difference are always being suppressed.[14] The film demonstrates that no matter how many times you watch Fleury's reconstructed footage, you still perceive new meanings with each new projection, which is a crucial means of achieving "playability" in a medium like electronic games that demand 20 to 40 hours of play time. The film also displays evocative forms of vertical editing, in which meaningful juxtapositions are arrived at through a process that is made to appear haphazard.

At one point, two strips of film are laid side by side, as the off-screen editor carefully pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's disappearance. The way they are positioned perhaps implies they are a couple, their juxtaposition against the water the link with death, the stirring music the range of their emotions, and the blotches both the fragility of their relationship and its secretive nature. When we watch Hortense ride forward on a bicycle and then see that same footage in reverse, we realize the linear drive is being abandoned. Instead, the narrative is driven by an obsessive desire to solve the enigma— to find the hidden figure in the bushes (as in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*) or the revealing detail in faces or gestures (as in Marker's *La Jetée*), or a conceptual link between any two images juxtaposed in time or

space (as in Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*) though here these links serve narrative ends. We keep compulsively returning to the same images, slowing them down or freezing on an incriminating detail, possibly to unearth a class-crossed love triangle between Hortense, Etienne, and the maid. Later, we see a blurred strip of film freely streaming through a moviola and hear the whirring sound of the mechanical apparatus and then the punching of a button that captures and freezes a specific frame as if by chance. The experience is like playing a slot machine, for we get a similar visceral rush of anticipation waiting for the winning or "right" combination to appear. Yet the element of randomness weakens any lingering faith we might have in any singular explanation or narrative closure. Although the mystery is never really "solved," the darkness of the randomly chosen images and the melancholy music create a tonal shift that invites us to meditate on Fleury's disappearance.

This thrilling sequence reveals how editing always functions as a search engine, for the unseen person whose hand controls the switch seems to be seeking the most meaningful and resonant combinations of images and sounds, those that will create a moving story out of these fragments. The fact that we never see the editor facilitates our identification with that role as well as our own immersion in this narrative quest. Despite the intellectual nature of this meta-narrative inquiry, the sequence's remarkable sensory qualities and emotional connotations also arouse a visceral excitement. This sequence brilliantly dramatizes the database narrative structure of all narrative: the process of selecting specific images from a paradigm or database of alternatives and then recombining them to generate a meaningful syntagmatic combination—a specific sentence, sequence, or narrative that addresses both the editor's and the viewer's desire. Thus, database and narrative are shown to be not alternative ways of organizing images but rather two sides of the same process.

Similar insights can also be found in Guerin's contemporary footage, where we see the spatializing of time and the temporalizing of space. For example, the shadow of a clock's pendulum creates a rhythmic arc that spatially links the static photographs of the two suspected lovers (Etienne and Hortense), a temporal instrument used to spatialize their emotional connection. Nearby, a warm light rhythmically pulses against the heart of Fleury, pictured in an adjacent photograph, as if he was disturbed or aroused by the secret romantic entanglement between Hortense and Etienne. Meanwhile, the image of Fleury's wife is eclipsed by a

Two strips of film are laid side by side as the editor pairs two figures, Hortense and Etienne, suggesting a latent love story that may somehow have been related to Fleury's death.

shadow. Conversely, static shots of a restricted space in the local village become a means of registering time and movement as people, vehicles, and shadows drift in and out of the clearly locked frame, sometimes linked by elliptical dissolves. This focus on reading nonverbal gestures, expressions, and temporal and spatial juxtapositions transforms fragmentary footage into a fascinating text of great sensory and emotional richness. It clearly demonstrates that cinema (regardless of subject, genre, or culture) has always been a medium of interactive narrative that requires spectators to engage in a process of mental editing—to make associative links between images and sounds and conceptual leaps that historicize their meaning. *Tren* provides us with a rich narrative field in which we can generate our own melodramatic plots, our own meta-narrative theories, and our own cultural reinscriptions of images from another locale—processes, like musical sampling, that do not depend primarily on verbal language or strict lines of causality. It also reminds us that cinema is a medium of light, and that every film is a moving train of shadows that documents the passing of time.

At one point in the blatant color reconstruction of a scene between the maid and the libidinous Uncle

Etienne, with whom she is presumably having an affair, she speaks the film's singular line of scripted spoken dialogue: "They have seen us." This line is then repeated in a replaying of the scene, as if to make certain that we have not missed the sexual implications of their tryst. Yet we still don't know to whom the "they" refers —to the lovely Hortense, with whom he is also repeatedly linked romantically by Guerin's editing; or to the other young members of the Fleury family, whose anxious faces are repeatedly scrutinized by the camera in Guerin's reediting of the footage; or to us in Guerin's audience, who are constantly forced to revise and expand the narrative field against which we are reading these images and sounds as each reiteration or new frame of footage unfolds.

Through all of these iterations, the mystery remains and grows more resonant. Finally, it is not merely the melodramatic disappearance of a particular Frenchman one morning in the mist, but the disappearance of an entire family, an era, and a way of life. And also the threatened disappearance of an artistic medium that is capable of documenting and projecting the incredible beauty and resonance of the most banal moments of everyday experience. So that when we see the contemporary color reenactment of Fleury rowing his boat out onto the lake and disappearing into the fog, we may associate this image with the earlier deteriorating film fragments of a man running after a train, or of the family car driving down the country road toward the horizon. Perhaps we conclude that Gérard Fleury has merely ridden into the future, with its faster-paced rhythmic movements of anonymous persons and vehicles, and of raindrops, leaves, and shadows whose extraordinary sensory beauty a Catalan filmmaker has so meticulously captured on film at this other end of the cinematic century.

By the end of *Tren de sombras,* we still may not know exactly how or why Fleury disappeared or whether we have actually seen any of his authentic images, just as we never fully decipher Ramón Mercader's motives for killing Trotsky or shedding his Catalan identity, but we do know that both of these uncanny figures have been rescued from obscurity and that this fascinating process of recuperation also seeks to enhance the visibility of Spain and its most marginalized filmmakers in the global sphere of the late 1990s. Like Trotsky, we underestimate these "obscure" Spaniards at our own peril.

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Notes

This essay is based on a paper presented at the "Brokering Spanish Postnationalist Culture" conference, organized by Teresa Vilaros at Duke University in November, 1999.

1. "Documenting the National and Its Subversion in a Democratic Spain," in *Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation,* ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 65-98. Particularly relevant is the discussion of two films from the early 1990s that play at the borders between documentary and fiction and that have strong auteurist links with *Tren de sombras* and *Asaltar los cielos.* The first was Guerin's previous documentary, *Innisfree* (1990), another obsessive examination of found footage (in that case, John Ford's *The Quiet Man,* a 1952 Hollywood movie that had a profound and uncanny effect on the small Irish village where it was shot, which is the subject of Guerin's documentary). The second documentary was Victor Erice's *El sol del membrillo* (1991), for which José Luis López Linares (the codirector on *Asaltar los cielos*) shot all the video footage. Like *Tren de sombras, El sol del membrillo* (*The Dream of Light*) emphasizes the materiality of the film medium while focusing on an artist (Spanish painter Antonio López) who failed to capture his local landscape (in that case, a quince tree in his own backyard in Madrid) in the "right light," but who succeeded almost inadvertently in documenting the historical specificity of his times. Erice's influence on Guerin was also apparent in the latter's debut feature, *Los motivos de Berta* (*Berta's Motives,* 1984), which has many similarities with Erice's best-known features, *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive,* 1973) and *El sur (The South,* 1983). Erice also served as a model for Guerin's slow-paced career: whereas Guerin has made only four features and an episode in an anthology film over a span of 18 years, Erice (who is far better known) took 30 years to produce almost the equivalent output (three features and one episode). This rhythm suggests one possible reason why Guerin might be interested in recuperating the work of a marginal French filmmaker whose films would otherwise remain unknown.
2. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works,* trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. 21, 155.
3. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 24-26.
4. Javier Rioyo and José Luis López Linares, "Los Mercader: Excéntricos y revolucionarios: Memoria," *Viridiana* 17 (September, 1997): 9.
5. Ibid., 7.
6. Ibid., 9.
7. Marks, 29, 31.
8. Ibid., 42.
9. For a Catalan filmmaker in the 1990s, a key question is language: Should he be using Castilian or the Catalan language, a choice that proclaims his cultural specificity (particularly since both will have to be translated outside of

Spain)? Guerin sidesteps the issue by making his film almost wordless (except for the opening explanatory titles, printed signs, and a single line of dialogue), and by relying on a cinematic language of visual images and sounds that is presumably universal.

10. In some ways, the film title *Tren de sombras* and the brief description "in search of the right light" evoke Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (literally, *In Search of Lost Time,* though it is best known in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*). Proust was also considered to be a dilettante or amateur by many of his contemporaries. Fortunately, the final volumes of *his* great French masterpiece were discovered and published shortly after his death, which occurred in 1922, only eight years before that of Fleury. Perhaps Guerin is suggesting that whereas time may be the best way for the novel to capture and express life, memory and subjectivity, they are best captured and expressed on film through light and movement (to both of which Proust considered himself allergic).
11. Jean Franco, as quoted by Alberto Moreiras, "A Storm Blowing from Paradise: Negative Globality and Latin American Cultural Studies," *Siglo XX/Twentieth Century* 14 (1996): 75.
12. In Guerin's scene where the curious sheep peers into the playhouse as if looking for the absent children, one thinks of the inquisitive ostrich at the end of Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* witnessing the massacre of student demonstrators. The camera's return to empty spaces earlier occupied by human figures also evokes the famous montage at the end of Antonioni's *L'eclisse.*
13. That is one reason why I screen *Tren de sombras,* along with many of these other films, in my graduate seminar on Interactive Narrative Theory. Because of the richness of its structure and the emotionally compelling nature of its images, *Tren* is the only film I screened for filmmaker Pat O'Neill and the creative team of interface designers, programmers, and graphic artists with whom I am currently collaborating on a DVD-ROM project entitled "Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounter with a Film by Pat O'Neill" (2003).
14. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113.

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Everything our mothers told us was good causes cancer: fresh air, sunshine, and milk. What next? Grammar. I'm going to blame my well-meaning English teachers for my misquotation of Tommy Powers (from *The Public Enemy*) in my article on "The Sopranos" (*FQ* 56.2, Winter 2002–03). Tommy said, "I ain't so tough," not "I'm not so tough." I feel the ghost of James Cagney shoving an ectoplasmic grapefruit in my face. Some grammatical brainstorm made me do it. Apologies, Jimmy.

Sincerely,

Martha P. Nochimson

David E. James

Soul of the Cypress
The First Postmodernist Film?

Through the 1920s, stylistic innovations, production techniques, personnel, and career paths crossed back and forth between major Hollywood studios and artisanal practices outside them—between the film industry and the avant-garde—with no great difficulty. Especially with "calling-card" films, more or less independent filmmakers in Hollywood produced a variety of innovative works with reasonable expectations that their experimentations would not preclude but facilitate the commercial distribution of their work, and perhaps bring them contacts and contracts in the industry. Framed by this aspiration, experimental films were in fact being made in Los Angeles at around the same time as the European and New York works commonly understood as the first stirrings of the avant-garde. The city became a magnet for would-be film-artists from all over Europe: from Vienna (Joseph von Sternberg), Paris (Robert Florey), and Budapest (Paul Fejos and Charles Vidor); from Russia (Boris Deutsch and Alla Nazimova), Germany (Charles Klein), and Yugoslavia (Slavko Vorkapich). But rather than existing in an autonomous art world outside of and resistant to popular pleasure, the experimental films made in Los Angeles by these artists were interrelated with the commercial cinema in a variety of ways. Where the spokes of international modernism converged on the hub of the industrial cinema, the experimental and the rationalized, the personal and the collective, were still in fruitful collaboration.

In Hollywood's liminal and interstitial spaces, these expatriate modernists produced a minor cinema that articulated the formal principles of an international avant-garde, inspired mostly by Expressionism: *Salomé* (Charles Bryant, 1922); *The Salvation Hunters* (von Sternberg, 1925); *The Last Moment* (Fejos, 1928); *The Bridge* (Vidor, 1929); *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (Florey, Vorkapich, and Gregg Toland, 1928); *The Love of Zero* and *Johann the Coffin Maker* (Florey, 1928); *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Klein, 1928); and *Lullaby* (Deutsch, 1929).[1] As narratives, they were all within the expectations of mass audiences and, even though 16mm was already widely popular as an amateur gauge, they were made in 35mm for commercial distribution. And since they all include representations of the subjectivity and perceptions of disturbed or traumatized protagonists, they estrange orthodox film style, often to the point of foregrounding the mechanisms of the medium itself. Of the defamiliarizing techniques they set in play, references to sound, especially music, are common, and attempts to represent or figure sound in silent cinema quite naturally increase toward the end of the decade. All these early presentiments of an avant-garde were, however, preceded by three art films (all based on music) made in 1920 by an American in Hollywood: Dudley Murphy.

Dudley Murphy is one of several paradigmatic cases of Los Angeles filmmakers whose careers wound through many modes of production from the origins of the avant-garde to studio B-pictures and independent features, including his direction of Paul Robeson in the adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933).[2] In the mid-1920s he collaborated with Man Ray and Fernand Léger on the Surrealist classic *Ballet mécanique* (1924). But before this, in 1920, when he was an art director and camera apprentice at Universal, he independently made three ten-minute "Visual Symphonies" that combined film, dance, and music. He made these in Los Angeles the year before Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* and Walther Ruttmann's abstract animation, *Lichtspiel Opus 1* (both 1921); before the first of the Surrealist shorts, Man Ray's *La Retour à la raison* (1923); and well before *Ballet mécanique* and Viking Eggeling's

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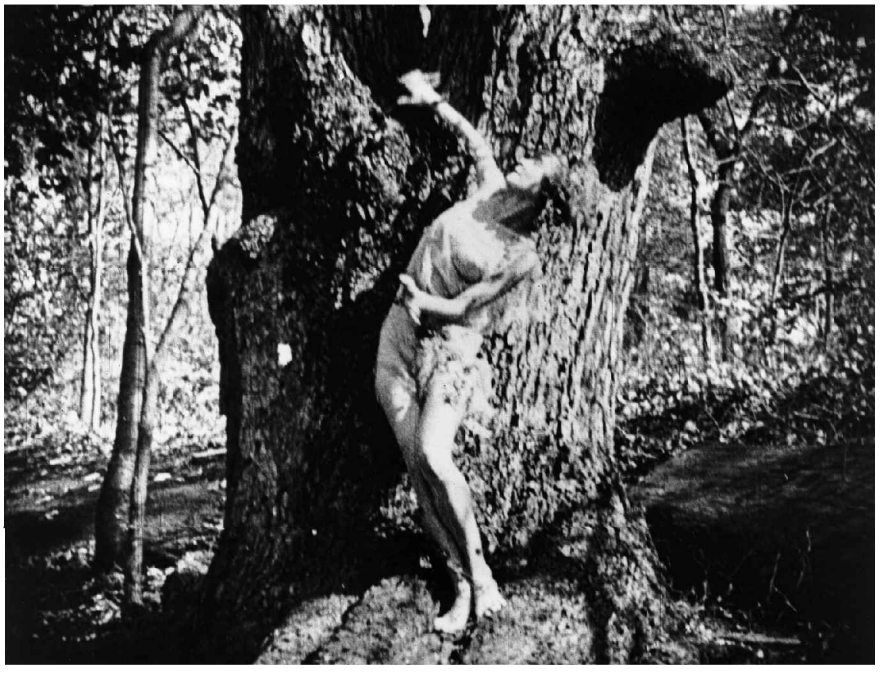


Library of Congress

The emergence of the Soul of the Cypress

Symphonie Diagonale (both 1924). To finance them, Murphy borrowed $500 each from four friends and used the money to hire John Eyreman, a novice cameraman; he recruited friends and acquaintances as performers. This mode of production—neither purely artisanal and domestic nor purely industrial, but rather a cottage industry spanning both and casually utilizing marginal industry labor—is the model for the Los Angeles avant-garde in the 1920s.

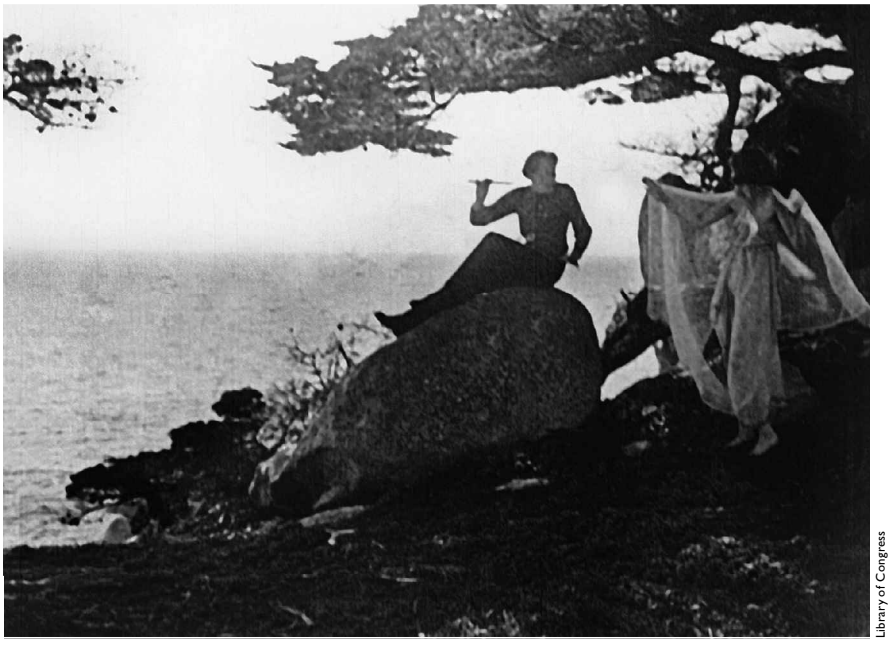
The first of the three films was *Soul of the Cypress,* inspired by Claude Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. It featured Murphy's wife, Chase Harringdine (a Hollywood extra whom he had met at a nightclub frequented by "girls working in pictures"[3]), who dances on the cliffs of Point Lobos, California, to the pipe of a musician—played by a young composer Murphy had met at the Theosophical Society. *Aphrodite,* the second, was a study of another dancer, his wife's friend Katherine Hawley (and later his own second wife), in a free adaptation of the Aphrodite myth shot in the grottos of La Jolla. The third, *Anywhere out of the World,* again featured Chase Harringdine, this time as a beautiful nude nymph bathing in the pools of the canyons near Palm Springs.[4] One of the Visual Symphonies survives: *Soul of the Cypress*.

Soul of the Cypress begins with a title celebrating California geography, its "romantic coast" with "a jagged cliff dotted with wind-swept Cypresses" that are "found nowhere else." Entering the establishing shots of this picturesque landscape, comes "a young Musician," inspired to compose his "Song of the Sea." He walks over the cliffs and through the trees, and eventually sits to play his pipe, silhouetted on a large rock overlooking the ocean. So entrancing is the music that it melts the heart of one of the trees, within which "a beautiful Dryad" is held captive, and a superimposed fade-in allows the dryad's body to emerge from it. Dressed in a diaphanous costume, she dances away, drawn by his music through the groves and across the headland above the sea, approaching closer and closer to him. At last she enters the edge of his frame, joining the two strands of the parallel montage that has separated them; but just as he looks round to her, a title interrupts: "Unfortunate is he, the legend tells, who falls in love with a Dryad—and more unfortunate he who tries to capture her." When the visuals resume, she turns away and, with the musician chasing after her, flees across the cliffs. Though she longs for him, as the titles reveal, she fears his "mortal touch" and, by means of a camera trick, disappears back into a cleft in a tree on the edge of a cliff. But from her prison she invites him via the titles to give his life to the sea so that he might become immortal and so enable her to join him for ever. The musician, tormented by the choice but inconsolable at the thought of losing her, finally commits suicide by jumping from the cliff onto the rocks and the crashing waves below. The dryad then again materializes from the tree and, as titles explain that she listens to musician's spirit that unites the "Song

of the Sea" and the "Soul of the Cypress" for eternity, she sits on the cliff top, overlooking the churning waves below.

Along with an orchestra playing *Scheherazade,* three dancers, and three opera singers, *Soul of the Cypress* premiered in 1921 at the prestigious Rivoli Theatre on Broadway as a prologue to the feature *Conquest of Canaan*. The Rivoli engagement was so successful that the film was booked for another week at the Rialto, and it was greeted by accolades in at least four dailies: the *New York Globe* averred that it pointed "the way to a new field of motion picture entertainment"; the *Film Daily* concurred; the *New York Times,* while complaining of the thinness of the story line, nevertheless later cited it as among the best films of the year; and *Wid's Daily* argued that it "presents an artistic scenic and at the same time breaks away from the usual." *Wid's Daily* also emphasized the excellence of the photography as "some of the best work yet accomplished in this line," and noted that "a great deal of attention is given to composition and tone, and some of the lighting effects are most beautiful." But none of these were thought to be so aestheticized as to exclude the film from popular taste: "Almost any audience would appreciate the beauty of this production," the *Wid's Daily* review continued, and though the titles "require a good deal of reading to get through," it was a "high class filler."[5] Its conventions were, in fact, those of the short-film genre called the "scenic," and its credits—A DUDLEY MURPHY PRODUCTION/A GEM OF THE SCREEN/A Red Seal Picture—suggest its comfortable position within commercial filmmaking. Sol Lesser, then an independent distributor, offered to buy it and the other two scenics outright, and give Murphy a contract for more. Thus despite its marked aesthetic accomplishment, the film did not break with industrial production; rather, it took advantage of the openness of the industry that then allowed independent filmmakers to produce commercially viable properties.

The film's rewarding encounter with the commercial cinema is on the other hand supplemented by its relation to earlier vanguards in other mediums and by its anticipation of the motifs and functions of postwar American avant-garde film. By Murphy's own testimony, *Soul of the Cypress* brought him "minor recognition as an avant-garde (for that time) picture maker" in New York,[6] and indeed it (and probably Murphy's two other Visual Symphonies) reflected recent developments in California Pictorialist photography. Its central motif of an erotically charged female figure associated with phallic trees and vaginal clefts in a dramatic landscape recalls the work of the Oakland photographer Anne Brigman, who in 1906 had been the only person west of the Mississippi to be elected a Fellow of the Photo-Secession by Alfred Stieglitz, and who exhibited (and later came to live) in Los Angeles. In the decade after 1905, Brigman made numerous photographs, considerably less prudish than *Soul,* in which a woman, often naked, is seated in or intertwined



"... drawn by his music"

Library of Congress

with a tree, or in which she emerges from a cleft in a huge rock. In 1907 she also made one that combines the two sexual metaphors in an image of a phallic woman emerging from a cleft in a destroyed tree—and its title was "The Soul of the Blasted Pine."[7]

Murphy's appropriation of these motifs, albeit in a censored form, and his adaptation of them for the cinema, is matched by other innovations that would come to characterize the avant-garde. The film's special effects—the superimposition that brings the dryad to life and the camera trick that makes her disappear back into the tree—may have been commonplace in the industry proper, and the film's failure to observe the 180-degree rule was probably an incidental infringement rather than a deliberate avant-gardist rupture of the kind Murphy later explored in Paris. But founding a film style on the portrayal of dance and in simulation of music became a recurrent avant-garde strategy, from the next year's *Salomé* to today's music videos. And the generation of a film out of the real-life erotic relationships of its makers became the basis of some of the American avant-garde's greatest achievements: a quarter-century later in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon,* for example, and then in Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man,* Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses,* and countless underground films. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that in making *Soul of the Cypress,* Murphy and his young wife shared the aphrodisiac pleasures of looking and being looked at that the film depicts, an exchange that, it might be supposed, led the two of them, out there in the natural paradise of California, to the complete physical gratification that the narrative denies the musician and the nymph. At the very least, the film instances the mediation of sexuality into artistic production later evidenced in the erotic footage that Murphy and his next wife, Katherine Hawley Murphy, and Man Ray and Kiki shot of each other for intercutting among the pumping pistons of *Ballet mécanique*. Such an essentially amateur use of film, not to sublimate but to depict, intensify, and *perform* an erotic relationship has been a staple of the avant-garde. *Soul of the Cypress* was, however, personally expressive in a parallel, but entirely negative way. For Murphy and Harringdine's marriage had not been consummated.[8] And so in narrating the story of the unfortunate artist who falls in love with a spirit he cannot possess in the flesh, Murphy in fact told the story of his "gay and spiritual love" for his wife, if not the story of his acute sexual frustration. But with *Soul of the Cypress* there is yet another rub.

The only surviving print of the film is held by the Library of Congress. As it is described above, its last shot of the dryad sitting on the cliffs overlooking the musician's watery grave and communing with his spirit supplies the narrative closure that implies the

Wilson Centre for Photography

Anne Brigman's "The Soul of the Blasted Pine"

film's imminent ending. But rather than being concluded by an end title, the dryad's reverie is interrupted by a rude injunction, "Explain this!" And suddenly the film cuts to a shot of a beautiful woman (not the dryad), visible from breasts to knees as she lies across the bottom of the frame. Apart from thin stockings, she is entirely naked, with her pubis centered in the image. Looking down on her, a naked man (not the musician) scrutinizes it, running his fingers through her pubic hair, shaking his head as if in disbelief or amazement. The lovers are together on a picnic rug with their clothes scattered around, clearly in some rural area. The camera pans along the woman's body to reveal her face; she looks at the camera and then back to the man. After a title, "We'll have time—if we hurry," she changes her position, spreading her legs and proffering her vagina directly to the camera and the spectator in a composition that recalls the cleft in the cypress that the dryad had entered. This "beaver" shot (reminiscent of those that later so fascinated Andy Warhol) is held for perhaps three-quarters of a minute to allow the spectator a fully indulgent, unhindered scopophilia. With a change in angle, the man climbs on top of her, and as they apparently copulate, two shots of exploding fireworks are intercut—nondiegetic metaphors that, as in countless amateur underground films in the 1960s and then in the signal crossover porn film, *Deep Throat* (1972), signify orgasmic pleasure.

The man rolls off the woman, though she continues to toy with his penis. Another cut introduces a schoolboy in Victorian costume excitedly staring out of the frame to match her eyeline, and then the title, "What—again?" articulates her unsatiated desire. After a title, "Turning back the pages of memory," the film reverts to the shot of the dryad still looking down into the roiling ocean; and as she stands, the sun sets in the sea behind the trees. A question mark fills the screen, then more titles lead into the final credits: "Educational pictures: The Spice of the Program" and "FINIS: An Ensign Picture." A Spanish dancer removes a fan from her face and smiles briefly into the camera before the final title: "The End of The Soul of the Cypress." This is clearly not the "high class filler" recommended by *Wid's Daily,* nor is the nature of "the good deal of reading" required to get through it self-evident.

The can in which this material is stored in the Library of Congress is marked "Soul of the Cypress and Miscellaneous Sex Scenes," though "miscellaneous" hardly does justice to the complex relation between the added scenes and the original film.[9] Hidden inside the public work, and close to the reel's core where it is protected from the scrutiny of public officials, the additional narrative instigates a critical dialogue with the main film's content, its form, and its social existence. *Soul of the Cypress* itself highlights the visual prohibitions that we now recognize as the basis of commercial film language and narrative. Though the dryad is initially attracted to the man's music—music that the original audiences would have also heard in the orchestral accompaniment—the film's crisis is precipitated by the visual attractiveness of the dryad's body, and it is the musician's first sight of her that prompts the title card introducing the injunction that leads eventually to his suicide. As in the commercial cinema in general, the interlocked system of desire and prohibition that generates narrative is pivoted on the body of the women, and most crucially on possession of her genitals. As Horkheimer and Adorno observed, in erotic films, "precisely because it must never take place, everything centers upon copulation."[10] Here the conventions of the late-Romantic motif of the femme fatale, Los Angeles pop-spiritualism, and a prudish popular culture combine to ensure that death is the only permissible consummation to the desire they have instigated.

The representational codes and shibboleths that sustained Hollywood narrative would, of course, be transformed in the next half-century, as previously proscribed sexual imagery became thoroughly commodified and integrated into corporate culture; but until then, their infraction in pornography contained a moment of utopian resistance against the repression intrinsic to the commercial cinema's functioning. Paralleling the "square-ups" of the later exploitation cinema, in which advertised pornographic scenes that had been locally censored were all grouped together and screened at the end of the film after the police had left the theater, the added interludes make a libertarian critique of the original narrative.[11] In place of the original's sublimated, censored eroticism, the amended and despoiled version permits sexual pleasure to be both achieved in the profilmic and represented in the diegesis; the genitals of both the man and the woman are made available for each other's and the spectators' visual pleasure, and the woman is allowed to look at and manipulate the man's sexuality, to return the camera's and our gaze, and so interrupt the spectatorial invisibility on which the voyeuristic system of the commercial cinema pivots.[12] Indeed, the Oedipal basis of that system as well as its constituent components are explicitly articulated in the interpolated shots of the little boy observing the primal scene.

"Explain this!"

Library of Congress

A parallel formal critique is implicit in the contrast between the classical narrative continuity of the original film's realism and the montage in the added scenes—in the compositional techniques that later avant-gardes have often opposed to narrative realism. Here the mixed discursive mode of the montage—some shots are found industrial footage, some are wholly illicit amateur sequences—constructs an artificial, purely filmic diegesis as well as interpolating within it nondiegetic metaphors (the fireworks) of the kind that narrative realism proscribed or exiled to the world of the avant-garde. As an erotic exuberance more typical of Brigman's work is added, the depleted Romanticism, saccharine transcendentalism, and sexual repressiveness of the industrial version of *Soul of the Cypress* are demolished, as if in anticipation of the more radical assault on bourgeois taste Murphy went on to perform a few years later in Paris with the aggressive urban eroticism of *Ballet mécanique*.

These infractions in film language correspond to the film's social illegality. It is not likely that the full history of this particular print of *Soul of the Cypress* will ever be known, but probably some impertinent aficionado or enterprising exhibitor edited together the original film and the additional material—the sex scenes and the fragments of found footage—as a *jeu d'esprit,* and the brazenness of the collage ensured that it would live only in a clandestine illicit cult. Combining erotic activity and cultural play undertaken for love rather than money, domestic pornography of this kind is one of the deepest roots of avant-garde film.[13] Here it is also the vehicle for the interrogation of the commercial cinema, the creation of a pastiche in which one half recontextualizes the other, deconstructing its conventions and its social function—the qualities not of the high modernist avant-garde but of the postmodern: the pastiches of mutually incommensurable styles, as in the paintings of David Salle or the collaborations between Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat; the rewritings of earlier texts, as in the fiction of Kathy Acker; or the framing of one work by another, as in Michael Graves' proposed expansion of Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum of American Art.

The only *Soul of the Cypress* we have traces then a cinema that is doubly minor, and creates one minor cinema out of another. As a scenic, the original was subordinate to the major components of the evening's entertainment, a "filler" between them. But a revenge was taken upon this subordination; the original film was deterritorialized, the codes that sustained it in its original context were reconstructed and freed for the inscription of new meanings, the activation of new social uses: the creation of new cinemas. Hence one—and there will be many others—of the originary moments of the avant-garde in Hollywood. As an independently produced film drawing on vanguard aesthetic movements that nevertheless secured commercial distribution and popular recognition and that led eventually to an industry career for its maker, Dudley Murphy's *Soul of the Cypress* reflected the industry's permeable

boundaries and the trafficking—some bona fide, some less so—that went on across them. What some lover of cinema made from it manifests the illicit, creative reconstructions of existing films that subsequently sustained the various disenfranchised groups and subterranean cinemas that came to be called avant-garde.

David E. James teaches at the University of Southern California. His most recent book is *Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture* (1996); a collection of edited essays, *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.,* is forthcoming from Temple University Press.

Notes

1. Of these, only *Salomé, The Salvation Hunters, Lullaby, The Bridge,* and *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* are at present easily available. *Soul of the Cypress* itself is at the Library of Congress, *The Love of Zero* at MoMA, and *The Tell-Tale Heart* at George Eastman House. *The Bridge* may be rented from the Douris Corporation in Columbus, Ohio. *The Last Moment* and *Johann the Coffin Maker* appear to be lost, though Lewis Jacobs gives descriptive summaries of them in "Experimental Cinema in America—Part One: 1921–41," in *Hollywood Quarterly,* vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1947), 111-24. For fuller filmographies for these filmmakers, see Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 363-82. Parker Tyler discusses *The Last Moment* in *The Three Faces of the Film: The Art, the Dream, the Cult* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1967), 59.
2. Born in Massachusetts in 1897, Murphy came to Los Angeles after serving in Europe as a pilot in WWI. He first became an assistant dramatic editor at the *Los Angeles Evening Express,* but soon found employment as an assistant art director at several studios. He was able to parlay the commercial success of the early shorts discussed here into a successful directing career. William Moritz makes a case for Murphy, rather than Léger, being the primary author of *Ballet mécanique*; see "Americans in Paris: Man Ray and Dudley Murphy," in *The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*. Murphy's short documentaries of mostly African-American music performance—which include *St. Louis Blues* (1929), the only film record we have of Bessie Smith singing—modulated in the early 1940s into "soundies," short films played in juke boxes that prefigure today's music videos.
3. *Murphy by Murphy* (Murphy's unpublished autobiography, written in 1966, a photocopy of which is held at the Iota Foundation in Los Angeles), 21.
4. These biographical details are all taken from *Murphy by Murphy*. The Visual Symphonies were made by Visual Symphony Productions, of which Dudley Murphy was president. By 1922, Murphy was designing them as visualizations of the works of great composers, synchronized bar for bar so that they could be accompanied equally well by a single piano player or a 32-piece symphony orchestra. The first of these was *Danse Macabre*. See the 1922 interview with Murphy in "'Visual Symphonies' Find Recognition; New Short Subjects Replace Prologues," *Moving Picture World,* 54, 4 (28 January), 387.
5. The first three reviews are cited in William Moritz, "Visual Music and Film-as-an-Art," in Paul J. Karlstrom, ed., *The Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900–1950* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 212; the last is from "Some Short Reels," *Wid's Daily,* 24 July 1921, 18.
6. *Murphy by Murphy,* 28.
7. See, for example, "The Dryad" (1905), "The Heart of the Storm" (1915), and "The Cleft of the Rock" (1905); all are reproduced in Susan Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision: The Photographs of Anne Brigman* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1995).
8. According to Murphy, his relationship with Harringdine was never consummated. He recorded that his attraction for her was "a gay and spiritual love at first sight," and that even after their marriage "though we slept together, we had no intercourse" (*Murphy by Murphy,* 23, 24). No such reserve kept him from Harringdine's friend, Katherine Hawley, however, whom he first met after returning from the Point Lobos shoot. They were soon having sex together, even though Murphy and Harringdine were still married—and still not having sex.
9. The Library of Congress received a 35mm full-frame nitrate print of the film in 1971 and preserved it in 1976. It came from the AFI/George T. Post Collection, and Post's records seem to indicate he received it in April 1937. The Library received a second print in 1988. The interpolated shots of sexual intercourse do appear to have been shot on the same occasion as the main part of the film, but a conclusive determination remains to be made. I am grateful to Brian Taves for this information.
10. *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* translated by John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 141.
11. For an account of the "square-up," see Eric Schaefer, "*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, N.C.; Duke University Press, 1999), 72.
12. "For its spectator the [ordinary] film unfolds in that simultaneously very close and definitively inaccessible 'elsewhere' in which the child *sees* the amorous play of the parental couple, who are similarly ignorant of it and leave it alone, a pure onlooker whose participation is inconceivable." Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 64.
13. Richard Koszarski has proposed that in fact pornographic films were the first fictional genre to make use of the 16mm amateur gauge when it became available in the early 1920s; see *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 187. On the relation between domestic pornography and the avant-garde, see my *Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1996), 216-23.

SHOWGIRLS

Showgirls is funny, stupid, dirty, and filled with cinematic clichés; in other words, perfect. Even better, the writer and director, no matter what they say today, don't appear to be in on the joke. I saw the film opening night in Baltimore with an audience that took it seriously. "That's what Vegas is really like," I heard a woman whisper to her husband without a trace of irony as she exited the theater. *Showgirls* will hold up; it will be great trash forever.

John Waters

* * *

As recently as December 26, 2002, Elvis Mitchell in the *New York Times* (p. E5) evoked Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995) as he sought to convey the true horror of the movie he was reviewing, which he described as "a picture that is mostly a desert of strangeness, a movie so bad that it quickly enters the pantheon of wreckage that includes *Battleship Earth* and *Showgirls*." Yet earlier that same year, a *Film Quarterly* editorial board meeting had been at first entertained by a chance mention of *Showgirls,* and then galvanized by the discussion that ensued. It turns out that there is a significant number of secret and not-so-secret devotees of the film—although their admiration takes different forms. And apparently—if unexpectedly— *Showgirls* has served to stimulate scholarly thought around what the film is, how to describe it, and issues of camp, satire, class, gender, the fallen woman, the showgirl musicals, trash cinema, sexploitation films, hedonistic criticism, and reading and teaching the film.

It was at that board meeting that we decided to present another *FQ* Round Table (the first one, on *Thelma and Louise,* appeared in *FQ* 45.2 [Winter, 1991-92]). Seven distinguished scholars—Noël Burch, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Chon Noriega, Ara Osterweil, Eric Schaefer, Jeffrey Sconce, and Linda Williams—have contributed to this discussion. It would seem that *Showgirls* might stand a chance of entering a different pantheon than Mitchell's. . . .

Ann Martin, Editor

ROUND TABLE

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Half-Star: Showgirls & Sexbombs

Akira Mizuta Lippit

In the 2002 edition of his *Movie and Video Guide,* Leonard Maltin rates Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* a "BOMB." Even after seven years to reconsider his opinion, Maltin describes *Showgirls* as a "stupefyingly awful movie—whose creators swear to have made it with serious intentions." Maltin, who is characterized in the *Movie and Video Guide* as "one of the country's most respected film historians," explains his rating system, which ranges "from ★★★★, for the very best, to ★½, for the very worst. There is no ★ rating; instead, for those bottom-of-the-barrel movies, we use the citation BOMB." All capitals. (Among other things, BOMB is also almost an acronym of "bottom-of-the-barrel.") Why can't a film receive a single star, and what exactly is the status of a ½? Why can't the *very* very best films receive ★★★★½, like an A+ in school?

Showgirls fails to register on Maltin's star-rating system, which ends or begins, depending on one's POV, with ★½. In Maltin's world, a BOMB is not only the worst possible film, it also has the effect of destroying the system itself. No longer a figure, trope, or acronym, Maltin's BOMB operates literally, as an assault on the—or rather, Maltin's—*star system*. Tracing the origins of the idiom "bomb" to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), one finds the reversible function of the word, which means—specifically with regard to entertainment—both a success and a failure. A virtual palindrome, "bomb" can be used to describe either a success or a failure, or even, perhaps a simultaneous success and failure. (The term is also used, according to the *OED,* as "a pregnant expression for the atomic or hydrogen bomb, . . . regarded as unique because of its utterly destructive effects.") In these senses of the term, *Showgirls* may be a BOMB for more than one reason: it may have bombed, at the box office and/or critically, while also bombing the very ratings systems that were never equipped to handle its effects. Or its utter failure, bomb, could be understood as the very basis of its success, the other meaning of bomb.

Maltin's entry, which is relatively long for a "bottom-of-the-barrel" movie, goes on to describe *Showgirls* as "part soft-core porn, part hokey backstage drama, full of howlingly hilarious dialogue." ("Hokey," *OED*: "Characterized by hokum; sentimental, melodramatic, artificial.") A hybrid, monstrous film that spreads across the genres of soft porn and melodrama. Here, a simple ½ rating might be an accurate description if not evaluation of the movie. Maltin makes no mention of its dance numbers, choreography, and music; and he never considers the musical, or other antecedents such as *Flashdance* (1983, ★★½), *Staying Alive* (1983, ★★), and *Footloose* (1984, ★★½). Nor comedy, for that matter, despite the "howlingly hilarious dialogue."

Is *Showgirls* part softcore porn? If softcore is exemplified by a general sexual ambiance (strip clubs, Vegas stage shows), partial nudity (topless dancing), sexual practices (lap dances, interracial sex, lesbian sex, sex in swimming pools), and sexual violence (rape), then *Showgirls* qualifies as such. It is titillating without inducing the full force of arousal. At least in part. But does the other part of *Showgirls,* the hokey half, affect the pornographic aspect of the movie? (There are hokey pornos, but in those cases, the porn is itself hokey.) Can a movie be part softcore and part melodrama, without altering the chemistry of either genre? What does a softcore melodrama look and feel like?

Periodically, producers and studios have sought to elevate pornography, or sexually explicit films, into a form of film art, usually by raising some of the production values (a developed narrative, character psychology, foreign accents, elaborate camerawork, and other forms of cultural depth). The objective is to mainstream pornography and increase ticket sales, or at least to assuage viewers' anxieties by disguising porn as something else. Among the notable efforts: the *Emmanuelle* films (none included in Maltin), *Café Flesh* (1982, not included), *Last Tango in Paris* (1973, ★★★½), *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976, ★★½), etc., etc. The results are usually an unsatisfying blend of pornography and drama: *pornodrama*. Most have bombed with porn fans, as well as with fans of serious drama. In each of the mentioned examples, one senses

the dissimulation of pornography, itself a form of censorship. *Showgirls,* however, can be thought of as both porn and not-porn, a type of impure ½ porno that never blends with its other half. As art historian Jean-Claude Lebensztejn has noted, in the languages of mayonnaise and photography, certain mixtures can be thought of as emulsions, suspended mixtures that never really mix properly or thoroughly. Like the expression "bomb," which can indicate both failure and success, or the movie *Showgirls*. Pornographic mayonnaise.

Perhaps the way to understand *Showgirls* is as a form of obscenity, rather than pornography. And maybe the obscene nature of the film emerges precisely from the grotesque hybrid of pornography and hokum. The illicit mixture that never properly blends may be at the root of this "stupefyingly awful" picture. (How could a film that is stupefyingly anything, even awful, be a BOMB, unless Maltin means this in the positive sense of the expression: "This film is the BOMB"?) A fair description of *Showgirls* is "obscene": to the senses, to taste, to modesty (it *shows* too much show, is *monstrous,* "howlingly"). But how does one rate an obscenity? What are the standards for a rigorous criticism of the obscene? Should greater obscenity receive more or fewer ★s?

The protagonist of *Showgirls,* Nomi Malone (played by ingénue Elizabeth Berkley) has served as one of the focal points of the film's critical devastation. She can't act, she overacts, she explodes in every scene, ruining the film with an eruption of affect far in excess of the protocols of so-called good acting in cinema. (Of her expressive force, Maltin says, "Berkley sets the tone for her performance in an early scene in which she expresses fury by vigorously spewing ketchup over her French fries.") Berkley is a bomb, explosive and destructive, within and without the diegesis. But she also has a secret name, or cryptonym, a word-name that exposes, as it were, another facet of her performance. Nomi is Polly, Pollyanna, Pollyannish. When her Vegas choreographer snarlingly refers to her as "Polly," Nomi shoots back, "Why did you call me that?" "Because you're a Pollyanna." She achieves happiness through self-delusion, remains blindly optimistic and pathologically naïve. Nomi believes she can succeed as a Vegas showgirl; extradiegetically, Berkley believes she can succeed as an actor. Inside-out: polymorphous, polyester, Pollyanna. By the film's end, the audience learns that Nomi's real name is Polly Ann. She really is Polly Ann, which is also to say she isn't yet anything, but believes she will some day be everything. A polymorph with many shapes past and future; a naïve if not innocent child; perverse but not really a pervert. Half everything.

One can identify two ways to read the homonyms in Polly's invented (synthetic) name: "No me," the absence of a self, or "Know me," discover a true(r) self. To no or to know, a prohibition (or negation) and an imperative. Or, better yet, to no and to know. Nomi is Polly, (but also) a polynym. Everything in *Showgirls* can be said to consist in multiples, contradictions, and antinomies; for every claim one can make about the film, there is always another option or possibility. The film is too sexual, even sexist, but not sexy enough (a distinction underscored in another genre-bender, *This Is Spinal Tap*); it's bad ("stupefyingly awful"), bad (naughty), and bad (good, as in "bad motherf★cker"); it's "howlingly hilarious" (dialogue), but lacking in irony (its "creators swear to have made it with serious intentions"); and of indeterminate genre: "part softcore porn, part hokey backstage drama." In this sense, perhaps Maltin is speaking precisely when he describes *Showgirls* as a BOMB. A description rather than a judgment. An obscene, monstrous bomb that fails and succeeds at the same time, defying a consistent standard of judgment, since about this film, every claim and its opposite can be made. (The same can be said for much of Verhoeven's oeuvre, which is marked by inexorable ambiguities. Is he or isn't he serious, sincere? Is he good or bad, in all the senses of those terms? Is he or isn't he gay, or, is he straight?) Perhaps the film is less a failure than a failed film; which is to say, a film failed by the institution and industry of film criticism, which never took into account the full extent of *Showgirls*' monstrosity, its rigorous (or at least consistent) obscenity. A more nuanced entry in Maltin's guide might have registered *Showgirls* as a ★★★★½ BOMB, which would have included every possible rating at the same time.

* * *

Embarrassing Showgirls

Noël Burch

Showgirls is certainly among the three films directed in America by Paul Verhoeven which are most worthy of respect. *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct* were also—along with *Showgirls*—written by Joe Eszterhas, which is probably not coincidental. *Showgirls* is especially remarkable for the way in which it associates gender and sexual issues with the class contradictions so often glossed over in Hollywood films. This is in fact an authentic "fallen woman film" in the grand Hollywood tradition: a working-class woman's sinful past catches up with her just as she has gained access to the world of wealth. Those 30s melodramas were theaters of forbidden pleasure *and* social injustice; they were about how it is women who must always pay under patriarchy.

Verhoeven and Eszterhas have contrived to celebrate the perfectly genuine attractions (not solely for the male eye, I would suggest) of the sexy Las Vegas revues—and more intimate ceremonies such as lap dancing—only to gradually undermine these representations with an exposure of the ferocious exploitation upon which they are founded. Critics I have read invariably emphasize the film's "vulgarity," perceived as consubstantial with that of the world it depicts. Yet the story of Nomi Malone, a dancer of undeniable talent (whose fate eerily foreshadows that of the extraordinary Elizabeth Berkley, whose career was nipped in the bud by a suspiciously violent critical reaction), is for me that of a working-class woman who rises from gutter to glory and finally rejoins her class when a succession of ugly episodes is capped by the rape of her best friend by an idolized pop star.

It is Nomi herself who demonstrates the principle of "every man for himself" which presides over this world and over American society as a whole when she pushes the current star down the dressing-room stairs so that she can take her place. She is acclaimed by the well-heeled audience of a fashionable night-spot, but this success is then doubly ironized by the star's unexpected gratitude—at last she can quit the rat race, she tells Nomi from her hospital bed—and by their boss's contempt when he ferrets out Nomi's shady past. His new star spits in his face, pretends to accede to the rapist's desire for her only to punish him with karate kicks (in a perversely erotic scene redolent of the rape-revenge movies), and goes back on the road, switchblade at the ready. A kind of happy ending: life in the gutter is a rat race too, but somehow cleaner. . . . It is also worth noting that the only solidarities possible for Nomi in this world of show biz are with members of her own class: two African Americans, and also, in one unexpectedly moving scene, the manager of the sleazy strip joint where she began her Las Vegas career who, though she had brutally walked out on him, comes to pay tribute to her talent and congratulate her on her success.

The film was trashed by critics on both sides of the Atlantic, in the U.S. for reasons that have been clearly perceived by a web surfer on IMDb: "Like all of director Verhoeven's American films, *Showgirls* is an over-the-top vision of American culture and ideals. The loud chorus of negative response to the film when it opened shows just how defensive Americans can be. Every film critic in the land seemed to suddenly develop a 'If-you-don't-like-it-here-then-go-live-in-Russia' attitude, typically reserved for members of the NRA." And he goes on to add that Verhoeven has often relied on "melodramatic, 'soap-opera' qualities as a style and a method of satire."

This universal critical condemnation often takes for its pretext the vulgarity of mass culture which *Showgirls* lavishly deploys and with which it has lazily been identified, in both form and content—even though, for the conscious spectator whom the authors are addressing, the film is criticizing the "gendernomics" of that same mass culture. No feminist, or male feminist sympathizer, to whom I have shown the film has failed to see that here Verhoeven is *not* playing the ambiguous game between the sneering contempt for mass culture and the complacent exploitation of its codes which characterizes both of the films written for him by Edward Neumeier: *Robocop* and the revolting *Starship Troopers*. In France, at least, the celebration of these last-mentioned films as Verhoeven's finest is intimately linked to the way they continually nudge middle-class adult spectators over

the heads, as it were, of the juvenile target audience. *Showgirls,* on the contrary, takes mass culture seriously, as a site of both fascination and struggle. And it takes despised melodrama seriously too, as indeed an excellent vehicle for social criticism.

The French response to this film has been highly significant of a certain backlash strategy, as in this comment from *Télécâble Satellite Hebdo* (December 22–28, 2001): "Verhoeven delights in this plunge into bad taste. . . . His [directorial] talent redeems a stupid screenplay signed by Joe Eszterhas, who specializes in heretical, falsely provocative subjects." A film about the exploitation of female, proletarian bodies is tarred with the brush of the abjection it denounces, in order precisely not to have to come to grips with that form of exploitation. Typically enough for France, although this magazine is aimed at a mass audience, the values of cinephilia prevail, with the tribute to Verhoeven's auteurist mastery compensating for the lowly category of value (one star) to which the pundits have consigned this film.

Of course, gender consciousness is not a very widely shared quality among the critics of France, male or female. But neither is it as universal as we might believe in countries where feminism has had more success. In *Sight and Sound,* one British critic (Linda S. Williams) faulted the film for not being sexy enough! Which all goes to illustrate a broader truth: the polysemic nature of Hollywood movie discourse, from D.W. Griffith to the present day.

A Whisper of Satire

Chon Noriega

Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* is something of a novelty. . . . There is not a whisper of satire in this movie.

—*Anthony Lane*, The New Yorker

Near the end of *The Questor Tapes* (1974), the last in a series of androids that have served as guardian angels for the human race is fatally shot by an agent of the state. The assailant, who thought he shot a human, notes that there is no blood, whereupon the scientist who has befriended the android cradles him, shouting, "What do you mean? There is blood everywhere."

It is one of the most chilling moments in made-for-television movie history, because we do not see the blood, but we know it is there all the same. If we were to reconsider *Showgirls* through the filter of *The Questor Tapes,* film critic Anthony Lane is the assailant, director Paul Verhoeven is the android, and I-the-academic am the sympathetic scientist. Satire is the blood that we do not see, the effect Lane cannot hear, but it is everywhere in the film's tale of a troubled woman coming to Las Vegas in search of stardom.

One reason why we do not see the satire in *Showgirls* is that the film lacks the usual coordinates and signposts for a critique of human vice and folly provided by sarcasm, irony, and caustic wit. Such overt satire is safe because we "know" what is implied between the scare quotes and to whom it applies. Because this is not the case with *Showgirls,* critics often took the film as equivalent to or of a piece with its subject matter. According to Lane, if not most reviewers, *Showgirls* "has the distinction of being the first movie about Las Vegas that is actually more vulgar than Las Vegas."[1] In this view, the film exemplifies rather than exposes human vice and folly.

The production team embraced this ambiguity and the attendant controversy in an effort to exploit the film's NC-17 rating.[2] In fact, screenwriter Joe Eszterhas and Paul Verhoeven played the press like an old vaudeville team. Eszterhas took the high road, cloaking the film in the aura of post-civil rights rhetoric—perversely inflected with his own sense of *ressentiment*—in an open letter in *Variety*: "Society will never change if we stick our heads in the sand and pretend that abuses to women, blacks, Jews and gay people aren't happening everyday."[3] Verhoeven took the low road—"I love to look at naked girls"[4]—but he continued his ongoing investigation of authoritarianism, albeit here within the capitalist logic of the state rather than with the state itself. Both men did extensive research in a "private dancing" session with a nude stripper at the Palomino Club in Las Vegas.[5]

While we do not see the blood of satire, its signs run throughout the film. The first one is a destination marker 342 miles east of Las Vegas, a city whose Span-

ish-language name translates as "the fertile plains," surely ironic for a desert resort. But by the 1990s, Las Vegas had become America's fastest growing city and was launching an advertising and public relations campaign to redefine its gambling-based fecundity around the image of the family-as-consumer. *Showgirls* registers the effects of this shift, but allegorizes them within a pornographic mode that inverts them: in the class-based distinction between the Cheetah Club (strippers) and the Stardust (showgirls), the former presented as a "family" of outcasts and the latter as a "classier" corporate ladder to be climbed; and, in the racial segmentation of labor (blacks provide the key service and servant roles). Contextually, then, Las Vegas represents the new frontier for family settlement, its racial problems now internal and labor-based.

The second sign is the name of the protagonist, Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley), who is hitchhiking to Las Vegas to become a dancer. While everyone around her there reduces their identity to "whore," understood in terms of labor-as-commodity, Nomi insists on the ethical and aesthetic gradations from whore to lap dancer to stripper to showgirl. But the film lets us know that she is wrong. At the end, as she is leaving Las Vegas and her life as a showgirl, Nomi (no me/know me) is asked if she won anything. Her answer is simple: "Me." (Beneath this allegorical tale is an insider's joke: Nomi is also the name of Joe Eszterhas's wife.)

What makes *Showgirls* unique as a satire is the way in which Verhoeven collapses the Lumière and Méliès traditions. The film has the strange sense of being an *actualité* for Elizabeth Berkley's performance. This performance consistently stands out from the narrative proper: we are aware of watching a former television child actor do her own dance, lap dance, and striptease numbers. But we are also aware of watching her act. Lane is right in this respect: "She can't act, but the sight of her *trying* to act, doing the sorts of things that acting is rumored to consist of, struck me as a far nobler struggle than the boring old I-know-I-can-make-it endeavors of her fictional character."[6]

We end up with a rupturing of cinema's sign system: character without characterization, method acting without interiorized motivation, and the blurring of realist and histrionic acting styles. The effect is disturbing when put into relationship with the film's baroque visual style (vivid colors, a symbol-laden environment), not to mention the subject matter. Most reviewers noted the "absence of both drama and eroticism,"[7] the "lack of characterization and narrative tension,"[8] and the film's dubious achievement of making "excessive nudity exquisitely boring."[9] Viewers do not get to have it both ways, the narrative justifying the erotics. Instead, they get neither; hence, the critical heteronormative rage as blood drained from erections. . . .

The film exposes the grounds for its satire when the show producers briefly consider replacing Cristal Connors (the star of the show, *Goddess,* played by Gina Gershon) with Janet Jackson or Paula Abdul. This reference to actual entertainers is downright perverse, pulling the viewer out of the diegetic frame for the first and only time. When the show producers announce that Jackson and Abdul have been passed over in favor of Nomi, they do so at a press conference, as if the casting of a Las Vegas show were a newsworthy event. As with Verhoeven's sci-fi films, the satire derives from receiving such exaggeration-cum-exposition through the filter of a television camera.

Even so, the scene strains credibility. Madonna, perhaps, but Jackson or Abdul? Their discursive presence serves another function. In the film, all the black characters occupy subservient roles: seamstress, bouncer, bellhop, bodyguard, attendant. The two main black characters—Nomi's roommate Molly Abrams (Gina Ravera) and Nomi's erstwhile love interest and a would-be modern dance choreographer James Smith (Glenn Plummer)—represent Hollywood's usual non-white Good Samaritans. Their misfortunes—Molly is raped and her nose broken, James gets his girlfriend pregnant and becomes a grocer's bag boy—frame Nomi's redemption and escape. Jackson and Abdul upset the film, imposing an extradiegetic signified that renders the narrative fictional by comparison. Here is the Hollywood corollary to "suicide by cop": reflexivity via blackness.

And herein is the "moral" of the film: the subservient character will redeem "us" from ourselves, then leave or be left behind—a morality that conjures up the "you're my best friend" ending of *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). While Eszterhas is liberal in his characterization of the oppressed—"women, blacks, Jews and gay people"—the film itself is more precise in its object: a white heterosexual woman. In the film, her redemption comes from blacks and lesbians. But while the underlying moral may be the same as in *Driving Miss Daisy, Showgirls* rejects Hollywood sentimentalism in favor of a perverse satire that offers nudity and banality in equal measures. Its satire comes by way of camp rather than sarcasm, while its identification is anchored in female-to-female gazes and Nomi's uncanny mimesis of Cristal's mannerisms (and not just her dance moves). Not surprisingly, the film's own redemption came from drag queens, who began hosting

"Showgirls" parties and who inspired the return of the film in midnight screenings. Even so, the adoration and imitation of hyperperformative white female stars tends to obscure the racial foundation for such objects of desire. Thus, the moral itself does not become manifest; or does so only fleetingly.

The last two signs in the film announce the past and the future: "Nomi Malone Is Goddess" (billboard) and "Los Angeles 280" (highway sign). Marriage is implied: Nomi is heading back to Joe Eszterhas. For Elizabeth Berkley, it is another story. Her debut paid just $100,000, a mere five percent of Verhoeven's *reduced* directing fee. Soon after the film, Berkley was dropped by her agent, and she has only recently re-emerged on the silver screen. In the end, the brutality that the screenwriter and director claimed as their topic became an "allegory of cinema,"[10] wherein the celebrity of the production team crushed the rank-and-file actress who did what she was paid to do. Sincerity is the sacrificial lamb of satire. In *Showgirls,* her blood is everywhere.

A Fan's Notes on Camp, or How to Stop Worrying & Learn to Love Showgirls

Ara Osterweil

It is a much celebrated phenomenon that cult audiences form interpretative communities around degraded texts. The existence of the cult film, or midnight movie, fascinates theorists from an abstract, sociological point of view. Generally, in these cases, the devotional practices of the audience make the film interesting by belatedly bringing the degraded object to life. The text itself, however, becomes quite unimportant.

The notion that "bad" films somehow increase their shelf life by affirming a marginalized community is very attractive. As critics, we are forever delighted when spectators demonstrate agency by reading against the grain; as historians, we are tickled by the idea that the most peripheral piece of rubbish can be reborn with the passage of time as an important artifact.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to abandon the text entirely. It becomes a startling vacuum, an unfathomable gap around which the most extraordinary rituals develop. The desire of cult audiences to embrace the worst possible text, and resignify it, functions as a kind of Midas touch. In seeking out the texts with the most pronounced negative cachet, the cult audience strives to transform the worst piece of trash into gold. However, critical discourse can only partially accommodate this kind of alchemy. Some movies are such disasters that even the bad-object-seeking cult audience fails to justify their appeal.

In an era where the appreciation of pornography, bad television sitcoms, and the weepiest of mid-century melodramas has become the sign of hipness among cinephiles, Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* may be the last guilty pleasure this side of postmodernism. In the undergraduate course on Trash Cinema that I taught in the summer of 2001 at U.C. Berkeley, even my most devoted "trashaholic" students found it utterly loathsome that *Showgirls* was on the syllabus.

When one's reputation on campus is made by championing "bad" films in an academic environment, as mine has (for better or worse), there seems little danger that it can be destabilized by liking something outside the norms of good taste. But this assumption is pure fallacy. All semester, *Showgirls* hovered on my screening list as the film that could make or break my perceived expertise in matters of bad taste. If I failed to make Stardust-worshipping converts of my students by the end of the term, my entire project of redeeming "cinema detritus" from the trash heap of culture was threatened with collapse. (At this point I feel obliged to state, perhaps unnecessarily, that I do not think that *Showgirls* is an excellent movie, or even a good one. Aside from my intrinsic ambivalence about the film, however, I believe it is worth watching, and I am prepared to defend it as a misunderstood camp extravaganza.)

Surprisingly, *Showgirls* is extraordinarily complex, and much more difficult to analyze than any of the other "trash" films that I have presumed to be its kinsmen. One aspect that never fails to perplex a virgin audience is its tone: it appears to connote a type of mainstream directness and sincerity. The film's relatively large budget and seemingly high production values, as well as its then A-list director and writer

team, suggest that it intends to satisfy its audience not as a conspicuous piece of trash, but as a scintillating, if disposable, blockbuster. One of the many ejaculations I had to contend with when teaching the film was the accusation that Verhoeven didn't intend it to be read as a radical piece of trash filmmaking or as a masterful, ironic parody. As unintentional debauchery, *Showgirls* somehow didn't "deserve" the subversive status I was attempting to bestow upon it. If we were laughing at *Showgirls* —and dear God were we laughing—then it appeared that we were laughing at it, not with it, and this distinction made all the difference in the world.

Rather than discarding the question of intention for its ultimate indecipherability and naïvete, it is important to acknowledge how utterly central this question has been to historical formulations of camp. By disregarding *Showgirls* because of its perceived lack of ironic intent, my students were dialectically reversing Susan Sontag's dictum that the best or "purest" kind of camp was naïve rather than deliberate. Although she claims that the "essential element" in naïve or pure camp is "a seriousness that fails," my students had seized upon Verhoeven's failed seriousness as the very factor which eliminated the film from any valid camp appreciation.[11] Had Verhoeven been *trying* to create a text saturated in chintzy artifice, histrionic affectation, and absurd sexual display, then it would have been the most brilliant piece of camp they had seen. Without this trace of distanciation, *Showgirls* was doomed, and so, it seemed, was I.

Showgirls proposes to incite the extremities of emotional and physical affect, but delivers a series of empty cues. Although its dramatic and narrative conventions participate in the melodramatic tradition, the film ultimately fails to move its audience to pathos or sympathy. Certainly our heroine suffers, and is compelled to make decisions of dubious morality in order to overcome hostile external circumstances that are at least partially determined by her class and gender. But aside from a modicum of sympathy evoked by Nomi's under-appreciated African-American seamstress buddy, the characters in *Showgirls* are so uniformly idiotic and their plights so ridiculous that we cannot help but laugh, with Oscar Wilde at Little Nell's death, at their downfall.

Showgirls also boasts of being an intensely erotic, soft-core exploration of the Vegas nightclub scene, in which tits, ass, and even a bit of beaver are lavishly displayed. Yet its presentation of the bodily spectacle is so grotesque that, despite its long-sought-after NC-17 rating, the film seemed to fail to turn its audience on. If the success of both melodramas and soft-core porn can be measured in relation to how many tissues spectators consume in order to rid themselves of unseemly bodily fluids, then *Showgirls*—in failing to necessitate this kind of clean-up—appears to fall short of its "straightforward" objective.

There is, however, another way of looking at this intensely problematic film. Although I am not as invested in questions of intent as my students are, there are a few key moments in the film that stand out as the markers of good camp. Putting aside some of Sontag's more dated and disturbing claims, it can be agreed that one of the integral hallmarks of camp is the love of artifice that the camp text evinces, the "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms."[12] *Showgirls* delivers this kind of self-conscious flamboyance at a breakneck pace. Set in Las Vegas, the privileged site of American excess, it manages to exceed even the most liberal standards of taste and credibility. Unfortunately, there is not space enough here to rhapsodize over the scene where Nomi and her arch-rival Cristal reveal to each other their love of Doggie Chow, nor where any one of Nomi's seizures on the dance floor is referred to as her possession of real talent. Nor is there time to discuss the placement of the ejaculating dolphins in the swimming pool, or the way that Nomi's eyes are consistently made up to resemble the glass peepers on a trophy deer head.

Whether or not it is intended as a piece of camp wit (though I think that the infamous "Versayce" sequence cements the fact that it is, indeed, deliberate), the film's outrageous sense of humor certainly demands at least a few tissues to wipe away the tears of guilty pleasure that it inspires. I must admit that the first time I watched it, I was too mortified to laugh. Of course, in those stone-faced days of pious Antonioni cinephilia, I had not yet learned to delight in the joys of bad cinema. I thought that I was too sophisticated a film student to enjoy such a farce.

One of the true challenges of appreciating a film like *Showgirls* is that as a piece of camp, it is decidedly middlebrow. It is much easier to appreciate a "bad" camp film like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures,* intended for an already marginalized audience of underground artists and homosexuals, than it is to excavate a bit of parodic truth from a lesbian fantasy marketed to a mainstream, compulsively heterosexual audience. If every blockbuster teen horror film, sitcom, and advertising campaign threatens to steal the signs of "being-as-playing-a-role" from the community of outcasts who first exalted it, then the political significance of camp begins to recede. The anxiety

Showgirls created, and continues to create, among leftist intellectuals stems from the fear that camp, like everything else remotely subversive, is in danger of being coopted by "the Man." For me, the desire to steal camp back, wherever it may be located, has become a kind of categorical imperative, a yearning to redeem that which seems irredeemable.

(As my final aside: on a questionnaire that I created for the film theory course that I taught in fall 2001, one of my former students from the Trash seminar wrote that her new favorite films were Kenneth Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandoes* and *Showgirls*. So I suppose my reputation as the missionary of bad taste lives on, for better or worse.)

Showgirls & Sex Acts

Linda Williams

"Tasteless," "vulgar," "exploitative," "tawdry"—these are the terms that were most frequently used to condemn *Showgirls* upon its release. Yet I loved every tawdry minute of it. Could it be that I just have bad taste? One common way of defending oneself against such a charge is to argue that what others see as bad taste is actually the prescient recognition of a cult classic, in the grand tradition of J. Hoberman's "bad movies"—movies that are so bad that they are good, failures so dire that they succeed. Such movies are usually low budget and made by outsiders; the problem with *Showgirls,* however, is that it is a very big-budget production made by quintessential insiders that is simply not that "bad," and certainly not all that alien to the Hollywood mainstream. It really won't do, then, to defend my bad taste by celebrating this film as radically "other."

Rather, I want to argue that *Showgirls* is part of an important and longstanding tradition of enduringly trashy—though never really "bad"—American movies whose tawdriness resides in the vulgar status of its primary subject: the showgirl herself. She is a figure American culture has both celebrated and despised as the quintessential commodification of womanhood. Her roots go back to vaudeville, Tiller girls, Ziegfeld girls, and early sound movie musicals immortalized by Busby Berkeley. Paul Verhoeven and Joe Eszterhas enthusiastically sought to update this figure in a post-Code, post-feminist and post-Stonewall era in which it is permissible to foreground (and of course to exploit) the new forms of vulgar sexual display made possible by such cultural innovations as the lap dance. The vulgarity of this update is perfectly in keeping with the vulgarity of the tradition it updates, only American critics seemed too puritanical to embrace it.

Consider Anthony Lane's derogatory quip that *Showgirls* turns its title from a noun into an imperative. The filmmakers, he writes, "have a story to tell, even a moral to expound, but their deepest wish is to get the girls to show. When Tony, who runs the dances at the Stardust, auditions a line of hopefuls, picks three, says 'Show me your tits,' and hands one of them a helpful cluster of ice cubes, he is acting on behalf of the entire film" (*The New Yorker,* Oct. 9, 1995). Lane means to condemn this injunction to show tits. But what else have the movies or stage shows in this tradition ever done but "show" the anatomy of "girls"? The fact that these tits are now acknowledged to be surgically enhanced and made erect by ice cubes is the film's way of modernizing the tradition that once focused more exclusively on legs (or gams). Is it possible that what Lane and all the other critics so horrified by the bad taste of this film were really reacting to was its contemporary updating of a showgirl tradition that makes no bones about both the prurient appeal and the artificial constructedness of what it shows?

If we look again at the Depression-era Busby Berkeley showgirl musicals, we find that their "shows" were always about prurient displays of bleached-blonde (chemically altered) "dames" and the ambivalent moral status of a girl who earns her living by showing her body through questionable forms of dance. In *Showgirls,* that dance consists of lifting a bare-breasted (erect-nippled) woman out of an exploding papier-mâché volcano, a sadomasochistic black leather dance of lesbian eroticism consisting of

a few provocative tribadic thrusts, and several variations of a lap dance.

In the Berkeley films, no less than in *Showgirls,* the girl dancers navigate the shoals of "dance" performances that ever since the can can have been uneasily perched between "legitimate" art and illegitimate prostitution. What is simultaneously fun and low-down about *Showgirls* is that it takes on this theme as its primary subject without insisting, as every Hollywood film made during the reign of the Production Code had to insist, that the showgirl who deserves to emerge as the star must also be sexually innocent. The jaded golddigger who knew the score would serve as the foil for the wide-eyed ingénue who didn't, but whose innocence would bring her success.

Showgirls offers the 90s update of this American showgirl tradition: it abandons sexual morality for a more substantial female solidarity. The ambitious ingénue, Nomi, is revealed at the end to have previously been a hooker; her first job in Vegas is in a strip joint with a private room for lap dances; her career takes off first when she gives a lap dance to Zack, the entertainment director of the Stardust, and later when she sleeps with him. Though Nomi tries hard to walk the fine line between prostituting herself and pursuing the art of dance, everyone, including the reigning star, Cristal, who can't wait to get her hands on Nomi's breasts, insists that there is no distinction. Endlessly bantering about the relative merits of their breasts and nails (not to mention the unspoken competition between their equally inflated lips), Cristal and Nomi are richly ironic twists of old stereotypes: the reigning bitch (and butch) queen, the ruthless ingénue who will stop at nothing to succeed.

If the moral fine line that makes the ingénue deserve her stardom still functions, it is no longer in her quality as Ruby Keeler trooper, nor in her sexual innocence. Rather, in yet another twist on the genre, it is in grafting the tradition of female rape-revenge violence onto the showgirl tradition. When Nomi learns that the one person she will admit to loving, Molly, her African-American roommate, has been brutally raped and beaten by a preening rock star, she dances out her revenge in the form of brutal karate kicks into his face and then walks out on everything. Nomi loses stardom, but gains herself. This happy ending, mixing violent revenge on the men who treat women like whores with ostentatious female solidarity, is no less a fantasy than the enshrinement of Ruby Keeler as star at the end of *42nd Street*. But the changes are worth noting: lesbian sex replaces heterosexual sex as the forbidden act whose sublimation creates the whole gaudy show. Lesbian sex and female solidarity give a new lease on life to the otherwise familiar titillations of the genre.

As in the earlier showgirl musicals, a principle of sexual sublimation motivates the musical numbers. It is never quite clear what the girls themselves actually desire—men or each other—since their dancing bodies are so much the source of the film's polymorphously perverse pleasures. Indeed, what is most striking about this film is that all sexual clinching tends toward dance, just as all dance tends toward sex. I submit that it may be this very blurring of the line between dance and sex that finally set off so many of the critics who hated this film.

We are informed more than once that Nomi's dancing is all heat and "pelvic thrust" rather than "true" dance. The assistant choreographer of "Goddess," the opulent Stardust floor show in which Nomi briefly stars, tells us, nevertheless, that "she's got it . . . they don't teach it in any class." The film dances literally and metaphorically around the nature of this "it": the line between fucking and dancing is blurred at every turn. Whenever Nomi dances she seems to be having sex, and whenever she has sex she seems to be dancing; there is no pure sexual desire and there is no pure dance anywhere in *Showgirls*. Perhaps the critics' hatred of the film was due to the absence of any "pure" erotic scene that is not tinged with power or stylized as dance. Consider *Variety*'s complaint that the film "just flaunts sex without eroticizing it" (Todd McCarthy). Could this mean that to him the film lacks a properly torrid sex scene that is "just" sex and not dance, expectations of which were aroused by the film's much touted NC-17 rating?

It is not fair to judge *Showgirls* by the standards of a *Last Tango in Paris* or a *Henry and June*. But it may very well be that the portentious European art house sex of these films is the only kind of sex American critics can accept, while the vulgar, tawdry, showy Las Vegas sex that reworks the more authentically American tradition of the golddigger seems just too tasteless for the American critical establishment to stomach. More than one review excoriates Eszterhas for enjoying the titillation of lesbian sex, when it is precisely the bad-taste glorying in the bitchy role-playing of that titillation that seems to me to be the great fun of the movie. It is very easy to condemn movies that attempt to have trashy fun with sex. But I predict that *Showgirls* will reemerge one day, like Nomi and Cristal from their papier-mâché volcano, in triumphant glory to gain the praise that it deserves.

Showgirls & the Limits of Sexploitation

Eric Schaefer

Some movies are genre killers. Whether it is due to their excess, overreach, or ineptitude, they have the capacity to terminate an entire class of motion pictures. Peter Bogdanovich's *At Long Last Love* (1975) was the pillow that smothered the moribund musical, and Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) finished off the Western more effectively than any showdown at high noon. There was nowhere else to go with the disaster picture after Los Angeles was destroyed (in Sensurround!) by *Earthquake* (1974). It's certainly true that musicals, Westerns, and disaster flicks have been made since, but the critical and/or box-office failure of these genre killers, or the way in which they exceeded generic limits, represented a symbolic end to genres that had once flourished. The release of *Showgirls* in 1995 did the same thing for sexploitation movies. Paul Verhoeven and Joe Eszterhas's high-budget exercise in low culture was the last gasp of a once thriving form already mortally wounded by the disappearance of its traditional venues, the proliferation of hardcore, and Hollywood's usurpation of its once formidable sexual spectacle. With every emphatic thrust of her hips, Elizabeth Berkley helped drive the nails deeper into sexploitation's coffin.

Surprisingly few people made a connection between *Showgirls* and sexploitation when it was released. Perhaps because critics and viewers were blindsided by its $40-million budget, *Showgirls* could simply not be thought of in terms of sexploitation, a historically low-rent form. However, having been immersed in sexploitation films for the past several years, I can say with the utmost confidence that *Showgirls* qualifies as the ultimate sexploitation film. Verhoeven and Eszterhas took a modest form, put it on a regimen of coke and steroids, and ballooned it to a point where it is impossible to imagine its bombast and excess ever being superseded.

Almost every one of *Showgirls'* characters, plot turns, and generic elements can be located in sexploitation films from the 1960s. *Showgirl*'s Nomi is a woman "on the run," escaping from a troublesome past. This is a classic narrative element in sexploitation—at work in, for instance, *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965), *Julie's No Angel* (1967), *Run, Swinger Run* (1967), and *Prowl Girls* (1968). Most often the narrative takes this woman to the big city, where she becomes involved in some aspect of the sex trade or in a series of sexually exploitative relationships.

With its constant references to whoredom, *Showgirls* hammers home an equation between the seedy world of exotic dancing and that of "legitimate" entertainment—in this instance, high-end Vegas floorshows. This less-than-surprising revelation is similar to the exposés of various sexually oriented businesses in sexploitation, whether it's the dirty pictures racket in *Nudes, Inc.* (1964), stag movies in *Cool It, Baby* (1967), shady modeling agencies in *Rent-A-Girl* (1965), or prostitution in *P.P.S. (Prostitutes' Protective Society,* 1966). *Showgirls* also includes the revenge finale that punctuates many of the sexploitation films, with Nomi "kicking the shit" out of superstar Andrew Carver in retaliation for the brutal rape of her friend Molly.

As with many sexploitation films, *Showgirls* gives a sexual twist to familiar classics or genres. Pulling together elements of backstage tales such as *42nd Street* (1933) and *All About Eve* (1950), the plot revolves around Nomi's effort to rise from strip club to glittering Vegas stage show. All of the familiar clichés are trotted out—the slow grind to the top, the casting couch (or swimming pool in this case), the backstabbing, and the grandstanding. Borrowing from, or sending up, familiar genres was a common strategy in sexploitation. (*Showgirls* has a more than passing similarity to *Starlet!* [1969] and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* [1970].) Not only was generic pilfering a shortcut to a serviceable narrative, but it could also play into common sexual fantasies or fetishes (jungle sex, vampire sex, prison sex). EVI was particularly adept at this strategy, with films such as *Space Thing* (1968), *Trader Hornee* (1970), and *The Erotic Adventures of Zorro* (1971). These formulations continued into the hardcore arena and hang on today, even if contemporary nods to mainstream titles and genres are usually in name only.

Along with these conventions, *Showgirls* has affinities with sexploitation in dialogue, plot, and spec-

tacle. The dialogue is awkward: lines vacillate between banal observations, vapid pop-cult catchphrases, and overblown pontification. *Showgirls* even contains a straight-faced variation on the line, "The show must go on"—words not uttered in a movie without tongue planted firmly in cheek since the 1940s. The plot is thin at best, and motivations are cloudy or nonexistent. Upon its initial release, most critics commented on the film's illogic and the characters' lack of motivation.

In sexploitation films we expect everything to take a back seat to the display of nudity and the mobilization of sexual situations. And that is exactly the case in *Showgirls*. Berkley seems to spend half the movie either falling out of skimpy outfits or buck-naked. The other supporting actresses and background extras contribute by baring most, if not all. As with sexploitation, scenes of sexual intimacy are often sublimated into sexy dances. We are treated to pole dances and lap dances, as well as simulated swimming-pool sex and the requisite lesbian flirtation. All these moments are carefully spaced throughout the film to provide an even distribution of sexual spectacle.

On a variety of levels, sexploitation films were always about excess. They were about excessive desire that needed to be fulfilled. They were about excessive display—the skin, the sexual situations. They were often about fetishism that blossomed into obsession: the Findlay's "Kiss" series is the archetypal example. And they were about excessive bodies; think Russ Meyer's pneumatic women, or sexploitation stars such as Marsha Jordan, Dyanne Thorne, and Chesty Morgan.

What makes *Showgirls* the end of sexploitation is that Verhoeven and Eszterhas wallow in excess in a way comparable to the later Meyer films, but without the varnish of self-parody. Everything comes off as overblown and preposterous. A few examples: Marty, the gay stage manager, hollering "Thrust it! Thrust it!" as Nomi arches her hips off the floor during rehearsal. The flimsy transformation of Al "gimme a blowjob" Torres, the sleazy manager of the Cheetah strip club, and comedienne Henrietta Bazoom into Nomi's surrogate parents when they suddenly appear to praise her dancing in the big show. The "social relevance," in the form of repeated and crass swipes at entertainment and commerce. The stage numbers that are outrageous in their conception and execution: an explosive "creation" scene set amidst spewing volcanoes; a motorcycle rally conducted in patent-leather S/M garb. And Verhoeven's direction is excessively obvious. After being raped by Andrew Carver and his goons, Molly flies out among the elegant partygoers like a piece of trash tossed out a car window. She's been used up and thrown away. Get it?

From the opening shot as she flounces out to the highway to hitchhike to Vegas, everything associated with Nomi is overly intense. As the camera moves over the dancing crowd at the Crave Club, she is revealed at the center of the throng, moving as spastically as a rag doll in a hurricane. Even though most viewers will most likely be reminded of Elaine's clueless "dancing" in *Seinfeld,* a friend of wannabe choreographer James enthuses, "She can dance, can't she?" Nomi literally throws herself into everything, whether it's eating fries, performing a lap dance, walking off a stage, having sex, or pouting. Her lunatic frenzy is evidently supposed to signal passion, but her reactions to everyday events and perceived slights mark her as a candidate for Thorazine rather than the lead in a show. Berkley's much-maligned performance is nothing if not consistent in its glassy-eyed aggression.

What made sexploitation films of the 60s and 70s so interesting, and what continues to attract new audiences to them on video and DVD, is their excess and the many ways in which it is manifested. This same excess is at work in *Showgirls,* but the fact that it is so superabundant stretches the form to its breaking point. As a result, most viewers reject that excess and consider the film a ludicrous failure, although some have embraced it, most often through amusing, and at times insightful, camp readings.

Hollywood drained out whatever life was left in sexploitation during the 1980s with teen comedies such as *Porky's* (1981), arch art films like *Crimes of Passion* (1984), and politically correct explorations of alternative lifestyles such as *Desert Hearts* (1985). The remnants were relegated to the dusty, direct-to-video rental shelves. *Showgirls* revived sexploitation long enough for one last, extravagant blowout. But like the inveterate partier who leaves his deathbed for a final fling only to have it kill him, the film's overindulgence ends with a flatline for sexploitation as a genre.

Sexploitation is dead. Long live *Showgirls*!

* * *

I Have Grown Weary of Your Tiresome Cinema

Jeffrey Sconce

Text of Bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

—*Roland Barthes,* The Pleasure of the Text

There's a thin line between stupid and clever.

—*David St. Hubbins,* This Is Spinal Tap

Before embarking on his now canonical dissection of Balzac's "Sarrazine," Barthes asked the rather pragmatic question: "How many readings?" In other words, how many times should a critic read and reread a repressed and repressive "readerly" text before it blossoms into the perverse plurality of the "writerly"? Barthes remained cagey in his answer. In the case of *Showgirls,* however, I can answer with precision: four. It takes four screenings of the film to transform it from one of Hollywood's most notorious flops to absolute transcendence, four screenings to cross the line from stupid to clever.

Having seen *Showgirls* five times now, I'd like to devote this brief essay to considering how Verhoeven's film has changed for me from screening to screening. Unfortunately, like most self-indulgent discussions of cinematic "guilty pleasures," mine will also resort to the confessional mode. *Showgirls* compels one to do so. It forces viewers to discuss their own personal history with the film in the same manner that one wants to share one's experience of the Ancient Pyramids or work through witnessing a horrific car crash. Unlike these other arresting moments in life, however, *Showgirls*' peculiar mix of stately beauty and raw carnage only emerges in full after several viewings.

Anticipation:

Before seeing any film, we most likely have certain expectations that will inform our eventual viewing. In the case of my own experience with *Showgirls,* the film opened while I was teaching at a remote campus in Wisconsin. For weeks I had been reading the hype surrounding the film and its NC-17 rating, and being an admirer of Verhoeven's earlier work, I greatly anticipated the movie opening at my local multiplex. As things turned out, however, the theaters in the Oshkosh-Green Bay corridor were owned by a conservative family that announced it would not book such filth (in the interests of community standards). Too lazy to make the drive to Wisconsin's Sodom and Gomorrahs of Madison or Milwaukee, I missed *Showgirls* in its initial release, which of course only added to its mystique. Snow-blind and a sulking victim of rube censorship, I looked to the promise of raunchy exotic dancers cat-fighting in the desert utopia of Vegas as a means of almost mythic deliverance.

Screening One:

I first saw the film a year later, after moving to California and scheduling it for a course I was teaching on exploitation cinema at USC. I thought it would be a perfect addition to a class that considered such cult and exploitation favorites as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Glen or Glenda,* and *Bad Girls Go to Hell*. My initial response, like that of my students, was one of amazed stupefaction. How could any film made in the era of corporate Hollywood's foolproof blandification process be this crass, this appalling, this flagrant, flamboyant, and over-the-top? *Showgirls* immediately became my film of choice for teaching the pleasures of the "bad film." Students who had previously fallen asleep during the older generation's camp masterpiece, *Plan 9 from Outer Space,* hooted and hollered throughout *Showgirls,* several of them telling me the next week that they had rented the film again for screening parties in their dorms, fraternities, and (yes) sororities. This may alarm some, given the film's rather notorious sexual politics. It shouldn't. Woe to the instructor who plans to use *Showgirls* to initiate tiresome discussions of sexism in the cinema. Your students are way ahead of you. They understand, even without a lecture, that this is a film not about sex, but the performativity of gender.

Screening Two:

If you see *Showgirls* just once, it will linger simply as an exercise in bad excess. Preparing for my second viewing, I was anticipating the stand-out moments I remembered from the year before: the French fry scene, the ice cube scene; the swimming pool scene. In between the laughs, however, I gradually began to appreciate how well made the film is in terms of style and technique: the mise-en-scène, editing, and camerawork are flawless. Verhoeven manages to make a visually stunning film about Las Vegas with little use of the city's photogenic architecture and no obligatory scenes of high-stakes gambling. Instead, he relies on an adrenalized haze of spangled sleaze and hypererotic histrionics. And then it hits you: this "extra-sexy" NC-17 film isn't about sex at all—it's about *all* things crass, vulgar, and cheap in America. In this very European take on the United States of Crap, everything is surface and sleaze, from the shrill Nomi to Cristal's Diamond-Doll Texas shtick, from the desolate desert alleyways behind the casinos to the cheesy volcano choreography on stage. The Vegas of *Showgirls* is the America imagined by so many Europeans—fast, cheap, artificial, transient—a world where stupid people have moronic dreams of fame and are willing to cripple their competitors to achieve them. Leaving the theater after screening two, one begins to wonder: Is the film bad or just highly, highly stylized? And how would I be able to tell the difference?

Screening Three:

At the third screening, Verhoeven's genius is unmistakable. One feels a sense of shame for not having understood the film in the first place. You emerge convinced that Verhoeven is the Douglas Sirk of contemporary Hollywood. He has taken Eszterhas's mediocre, even laughable script, and through strategies of irony and intensification, created a masterwork of Brechtian distanciation. By this screening, then, both viewer and film are released from the burdens of realism, character, and plausibility—free to engage in pure stylistic play. Suddenly, the film's reliance on stock plots, ridiculous characters, and traumatic art direction makes more sense. It's not bad filmmaking—it's a brilliant savaging of the vapidity of Hollywood's typical narrative machinery. Deeper now into this maze of style and absurdity, one begins to play the game of who in the film "gets it" and who does not. Verhoeven gets it, of course, while Eszterhas sadly, really seems to *believe* in his parable of Horatio Alger in pasties. Gina Gershon and Kyle MacLachlan get it. Poor Elizabeth Berkley does not. There is no empirical evidence to back any of these claims, but we are now entering a land of critical pleasure where textual "evidence" no longer matters; indeed, it's a hindrance. At this point I'm making my own movie in my head.

Screening Four:

When Barthes wrote "Myth Today," he believed a painstaking application of semiotics to capitalist culture would demystify the workings of bourgeois ideology. By the time he gets to *S/Z,* Barthes is still interested in exploring and exploding bourgeois clichés, platitudes, and doxa, but crucially, he no longer feels the need to justify his critical excursions as a path to political enlightenment. The Barthes of *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text* is interested in only one thing: the pleasures to be had when a really smart person visits his or her critical prowess with extreme violence on otherwise unremarkable and even moronic texts. This is where we arrive after the fourth (and possibly all subsequent) screenings of *Showgirls.* Is the film bad? Good? Racist? Sexist? Brechtian? Radical? Reactionary? Who cares to answer such unknowable and ultimately unimportant questions? It is enough that *Showgirls* exists to indulge our intoxication with its sublime catastrophes.

And now the epiphany! Media criticism must learn to give up the charade of pompous legitimization through appeals to social or political utility. It must reembrace the hedonistic pleasures of criticism as a worthy enterprise in and of itself. The world must be made safe again for the aesthete, the world-weary dandy. How many times have we suffered the bromide, "Those who can't do, teach," and its equally dimwitted cousin, "Those who can't create, critique"? I believe film educators need to expose this fiction for the evil lie that it is! We must teach our students to be smarter than the texts they consume. We must teach them that there is ultimately more power in becoming a smirking connoisseur of Hollywood's mass crap than in landing a sweet gig as the second-unit DP for *Highlander—The Series*. *Showgirls* can help us do this. It leads the way by giving us, in the spirit of Baudrillard, the more vulgar than vulgar, the more obscene than obscene. In the process, it liberates the critic from his or her role as cultural custodian and reacquaints us with the long-lost Edenic text of bliss. No longer must we apologize for our cultivation, our wit, our condescension. Textual libertines of the new century, unite! You have nothing to lose but your boredom.

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Notes

1. Anthony Lane, "Starkness Visible," *The New Yorker,* October 9, 1995, 95.
2. See Kevin S. Sandler, "The Naked Truth: *Showgirls* and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating," *Cinema Journal* 40.3 (Spring 2001): 69-93.
3. Quoted in Maureen Dowd, "Liberties: The Rise of the Fallen," *New York Times,* September 21, 1995, Sec. A, 23.
4. Ibid.
5. Joseph Gelmis, "The Joys of Sex on the Screen," *Newsday,* September 20, 1995, Part II, B03.
6. Lane, "Starkness Visible," 96.
7. Janet Maslin, "$40 Million Worth of Voyeurism," *New York Times,* September 22, 1995, Sec. C, 1.
8. Todd McCarthy, "'Showgirls' Takes It Sleazy," *Variety*, September 25-October 1, 1995, 91.
9. Kenneth Turan, "The Naked Truth About 'Showgirls,'" *Los Angeles Times,* September 22, 1995, Sec. F, 1.10.
10. See David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), esp. chapter 1.
11. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 282-83.
12. Ibid., 279.

Reviews

Heaven

Director: Tom Tykwer. Writers: Krzysztof Kieślowski, Krzysztof Piesiewicz. Producers: Steven Arndt, Frédérique Dumas-Zajdela, William Horberg, Maria Kopf. Cinematographer: Frank Griebe. Music: Arvo Pärt, Marius Ruhland, Tom Tykwer. Miramax.

Two lovely lovers on the run from the law, but love conquers all. In a way. It's easy to dismiss Tom Tykwer's *Heaven* (2002) as an improbable melodrama. How plausible can a love story between a woman bomber and a virgin cop 12 years younger be? A kind of Sirk *du soleil*? But such a literalist approach misses the film's celestial aspiration. The project gives Polish auteur Krzysztof Kieślowski a voice from beyond the grave—it's based on the first part of a trilogy he wrote with Krzysztof Piesiewicz. When Kieślowski died in 1996, Miramax producer Harvey Weinstein offered the script to Anthony Minghella, who eventually declined.[1] As Tykwer resurrected Kieślowski's vision, the film is doubly about heaven: how we look from there and how we can get there.

True, the lovers-on-the-lam plot smacks of *Bonnie and Clyde*—Italian style. Phillipa Paccard (Cate Blanchett) teaches English in Turin. After her husband dies of an overdose and she sees her students victimized by drugs, she warns the police that a prominent electronics executive heads the city's drug operation. They're not impressed that his name, Vendici, denotes "dealer." When the cops don't act, Phillipa puts a bomb in Vendici's office. By mischance it kills not him but a cleaning lady, along with a chance passerby and his two little daughters. Phillipa is arrested and charged with terrorism. When she learns how her plot has misfired she faints in horror.

Yet despite her guilt, Phillipa wins the instinctive support of Filippo (Giovanni Ribisi), the young policeman who has been recording and translating her intense interrogation. When he offers to help her escape, she accepts, just to complete her mission. After she

Lovers on the run: Cate Blanchett as Phillipa and Giovanni Ribisi as Filippo.

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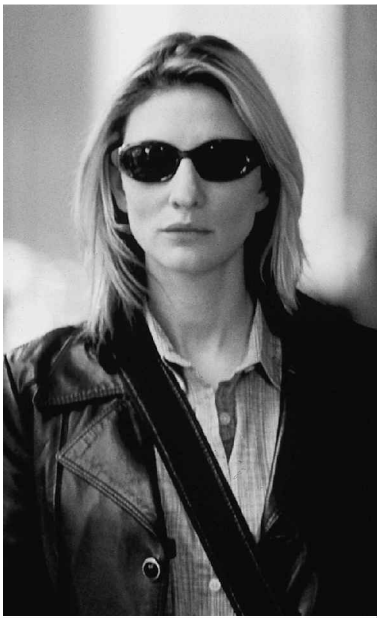

Portrait of a terrorist?

kills the drug magnate she flees with Filippo. They make love in a country meadow. When the *carabinieri* arrive, the couple steals the police helicopter and rises into heaven.

Phillipa and Filippo seem unlikely prospects for romance. While she is mature, Filippo continues the near-fetal naïvete that Ribisi has projected in such films as *Saving Private Ryan, Boiler Room*, and *Amen*. The callow lad regresses to his bed-wetting—a valediction to the business of youth—when he realizes he is in love with the bomber. He lives in the shadow of his father, formerly Turin's police chief, now even higher up in the police hierarchy. By helping Phillipa, Filippo (1) proves to be a masterful strategist, and (2) knowingly throws away his respectable life and career for a killer who has not yet evinced any interest in him.

Their love begins when Phillipa comes out of her faint and clutches Filippo's finger. Like God's finger reaching down to Michelangelo's Adam, this touch galvanizes both of them to new life. Phillipa snaps Filippo into a new fullness of living, into a new maturity. Now he dares to do what he believes to be right, in the face of the values and legality of his father's world. In return, Filippo renews Phillipa's spirit. He enables her to complete her illegal but principled mission and he revives her self-respect. "I don't want to escape punishment," she tells Filippo after he has rescued her. "I killed four innocent people and I want to accept punishment for that"—but only after she has killed Vendici. Typical of Kieslowski, both characters find an unconventional ethic for self-actualization.

Filippo returns Phillipa to atonement and grace in three key scenes. In the first, the fleeing couple takes refuge in a country church. What appears to be Phillipa's Catholic confession—"I have lied. . . . I was unfaithful"—is heard not by the priest but by Filippo. She tells him she can't live with the fact she killed four people and that she no longer believes "in sense, in justice, in life." For the resigned Catholic Kieslowski, the Church's power lies not its exclusive mediation between man and God but in its provision of a site for human community and communion. Phillipa's confession, atonement, and absolution center upon Filippo, her secular savior. Against a hauntingly simple cello and piano duet, Filippo absolves her: "I love you." She leaves heartened: "I know. It's just—it's just that I want the end to come soon."

Her grace deepens in the second conversion scene. When the outlaws meet with Filippo's father outside the church, he knows that Filippo loves Phillipa, but asks whether she loves him. Phillipa considers for a full 20 seconds. Presumably she weighs her sense of this strange young man—her gratitude and admiration for his planning and engineering their escape, the possibility and consequences of his returning with his father to his normal life, their limited prospects together—before giving the answer to which she is intensely committed: "*Si*."

In the final conversion their union takes two forms. The first is their love-making, idyllic under a moonlit tree. The dusk silhouette reduces the horizontal field to its essence. The second is their helicopter escape, which is sheer vertical. These two scenes complete the alternative cross of their grace.

The lovers escape not so much the law as our earthbound life and morality. As the helicopter instructor in the film's opening scene warns Filippo, "In a real helicopter you can't just keep going higher." The film will answer the pupil's question: "How high can I fly?" When our lovers soar up, it is to their unseen death, free from the physical violation of, say, Bonnie and Clyde, more like, say, Thelma and Louise. That's the film's real romance, not the love: our heroes don't break or escape the law but transcend it. Until now, Phillipa's plans have been thwarted by chance and mischance. Her divorce was prevented when her husband OD'd. Her bombing is redirected to the innocents. In soaring off together, the lovers finally control their lives. They die ethically and romantically fulfilled.

Perhaps Tykwer's romantic energy has tempered Kieslowski's moral rigor, because it's hard not to embrace these killers. Phillipa's virtue is carefully estab-

lished. She decides to deploy the bomb only after the funeral of a 13-year-old druggie's suicide. She takes pains to target only the drug dealer, luring away his receptionist with a false phone call. Before the bomb goes off, she tells the police why she planted it and gives her name.

When they shave their heads to elude their hunters, Phillipa and Filippo turn into twins. Despite their initial differences, they complete each other. Their homonymous names suggest their essential bond. They even have the same birthday, though Filippo was born on the day Phillipa, gowned in white like a bride, had her first Communion—a ceremony that prefigures their present union. Phillipa's radiant skull also evokes Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*—another inspired Christian martyr who transcends the compromised world and an antipathetic church.

When the fugitives escape from the jail in the back of a milk truck, the driver pauses for a quickie with a sweets seller. That scene contrasts to our heroes' slow love. Phillipa is touched by her savior's delicacy when he sleeps chastely beside her on their first night together and when he directs her to the shower.[2] With the same discretion, the camera withdraws from the silhouette love scene.

Tykwer and his D.P., Frank Griebe, flash their familiar cinematic brio with a panoply of high-angle shots. The first is the artifice of the flight-simulation video, a full-screen green and yellow field; the trees anticipate the lovers' night scene. In a dramatic downshot later in the film, we see an elevator rise as Phillipa enters the building below. In a later eye-level shot, she descends in the outside escalator while the elevator rises. Then Tykwer provides the first of several aerial sweeps across our world, as if from a helicopter. These angel—or Kieslowski?—eye views flatten out the spaces that normally tower above us. The effect is to reduce the three-dimensional world to a geometric pattern that we are free to transcend—or to prison walls that we are urged to breach. In this vein Tykwer exposes the *carabinieri*'s fortress, with its tower clockworks, after Filippo has escaped its shallow authority.

In interior variations, the camera peers down on the interrogation room and on Phillipa on her prison bed. Each high-angle shot of a cell or enclosure confirms the prison implication of the city aerials. But some high-angle shots are benign, as if a blessing. One is accorded Filippo's father when he drives out to meet the fugitives. Out of uniform, in white and beige, he is the father, offering help should they want him to drive them back, and a thick envelope of money when they don't. He's a remarkable character: a father unimpeded by his duties as a police executive. "Why can't we ever do anything at the most important moments?" he asks, weeping in frustration. But he does: kissing Phillipa and hugging Filippo. His older son's heroic instincts and his younger son's efficient help with the escape show that he has effectively taught them human responsibility.

The aerial trope prefigures the lovers' transcendence of secular life and law. When the last shot holds on the sky until their helicopter disappears into it, the film remains earthbound to record this transcendence. In *Heaven*, director Tykwer relays Kieslowski's rejection of mundane values, and—exceeding the helicopter instructor's lesson—models the courage and openness required to get to the heaven that counts.

In Kieslowski's trilogy, the subsequent films were to be titled *Hell* and *Purgatory*. Oh, please God—or, even better, Harvey Weinstein—let Tykwer do them, too. His *Heaven* is a perfect start.

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Notes

1. Minghella remained on board with Sydney Pollack among the executive producers. The Polish script was translated into French, then into English, then into German by Tykwer. Minghella then helped translate it back into English. The print was released in Italian and English after a year's delay due to 9/11.
2. The ensuing scene—where two chattering cleaning ladies seem about to discover Phillipa in the shower room—may be an homage to the deaf cleaner scene in Hitchcock's *Marnie*. Again, we cheer for the outlaw.

CONGRATULATIONS!

We want to congratulate *FQ* Book Review Editor Stephen Prince on his election as the next President of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS). He will soon be stepping down from his position here, and we want to take this opportunity to thank him—his steady dedication and sound judgement will be sorely missed. Eleven years ago, when I asked Steve to take charge of assigning book reviews for *FQ*, I could not foresee how much he would contribute to the journal . . . nor did I imagine how much I would enjoy working with him. Thank you for both, Steve!

Ann Martin

Book Reviews

Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness

Edited by Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. $24.95.

The past decade has seen major contributions to the emergent field of whiteness studies as an expansion of critical race theory and cultural studies. Scholars from a range of disciplines have increasingly argued that whiteness and all race formations are powerful mythologies that have no actual scientific or biological basis, but are instead products of the highly malleable contingencies of politics, ideology, history, and culture. Key texts in the field of whiteness studies to date have included David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993), Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), and Richard Dyer's *White* (1997). Dyer in particular has theorized the naturalized invisibility of whiteness as essential to its hegemonic power as the unmarked, normative, non-raced identity position that is "at once everything and nothing."

Increasingly, cultural critics have also explored the myriad ways in which Hollywood films have historically policed a color line separating whiteness from non-whiteness. Daniel Bernardi's 1996 anthology, *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, for instance, collected together 13 essays that both critiqued hegemonic racist and racializing practices in the development of American silent cinema (in films by D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Robert Flaherty, for example) and revealed oppositional points of resistance (Oscar Micheaux, Sessue Hayakawa, the Jack Johnson fight films). With *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, Bernardi has edited an unofficial sequel to that first volume, bringing together 19 articles that further map the complex intersections of race, representation, and the Hollywood studio system from the advent of the sound film to about 1960. One of the overriding goals of the project is to historicize and analyze ways in which a color line defined by whiteness directed the trajectory of the Classical Hollywood style during those three decades. In Bernardi's introduction, he sets up the theoretical and political stakes for this anthology project within the larger discourses of whiteness studies generally. Bernardi sees whiteness as a performance in which "there are no white people per se; only those who pass as white." "We must recognize," he writes, "that the myth of white people, however powerful and long-lived, is not transhistorical or even transcultural. . . . The Irish have not always been white, neither have the Jews, Italians, or for that matter, the Aryans and Jesus Christ. The ranks of whiteness has changed with history thanks to mutations in culture, dialects, cosmetics, and 'miscegenation'" (xxi-xxii). Bernardi thus intends this new volume as a further interventionist means of unveiling whiteness in American classical cinema as a racist and mythologizing norm by which all non-white Others fail by comparison.

Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness is organized under four main headings: "Class," "Gender," "War," and "Industry." One of the arguable weaknesses of *The Birth of Whiteness* was the virtual absence of critical attention toward immigration, assimilation, and ethnicity in American silent cinema. Perhaps as a means of redressing that oversight, the "Class" section of this new anthology opens with an article entitled "What You Are . . . I Wouldn't Eat: Ethnicity, Whiteness, and Performing 'the Jew' in Hollywood's Golden Age." Partly inspired by the late Michael Rogin's groundbreaking work on the complex operations of racial and ethnic masquerade (in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*), Nicholas Sammond and Chandra Mukerji comparatively investigate the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942) as politically engaged satires that negotiate Jewishness as a structuring absence between ethnicity and whiteness. As the authors observe: "If *A Night at the Opera* presents a comic vision of European sophistication and civilization under assault by its rebellious poor ethnic relations, *To Be Or Not To Be* shows European whiteness collapsing from within" (5).

Also included in the "Class" section is Aaron Baker's essay, "From Second String to Solo Star: Classic Hollywood and the Black Athlete," which historicizes a cycle of three biographical sports films of the early 1950s: *The Joe Louis Story*, *The Harlem Globetrotters*, and *The Jackie Robinson Story*. Baker argues that while these semi-documentary feature films starring self-reliant African-American protagonist heroes were progressive for their period, the genre valorized black individual achievement and self-sacrifice under the benign guidance of white paternalism in order to distract from larger social and economic conditions. Eric Avila's essay, "Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America," interrogates the racial politics and sociology of white suburbanization and African-American urban migrations to read two alien invasion films, *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Them* (1954), as anxiety-filled allegories which conflate racial Otherness with predatory monstrosity and animalistic reproduction. Gina Marchetti continues her outstanding work on romance and the "Yellow Peril" in Hollywood racial melodramas to recover the little-known 1930 Warners/First National talkie, *Son of the Gods*. The film stars Richard Barthelmess as Sam Lee, the Americanized biological son of wealthy entrepreneurial Chinese parents, and Constance Bennett as Allana Wagner, a white Californian heiress to a soap fortune. As Marchetti demonstrates, the moneyed-class standing and "superior" breeding shared by these race-crossed lovers (plus the final

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benediction of a last-minute plot revelation) ultimately trump any miscegenation taboos in *Son of the Gods*, a text that carefully strips Chinese "Mandarin-class" ethnicity from Chinese "coolie-class" race. This opening section of essays on class is perhaps the most thought-provoking overall in the anthology, exploring in terms of race and ethnicity just how much "Classic" Hollywood overlaps with "Classist" Hollywood.

The lead article in the subsequent section on "Gender" also sharply addresses class boundaries, as well as economic, regional, and spoken dialect divides within American whiteness itself. Allison Graham explores the crisis of Southern womanhood in *The Three Faces of Eve*, brilliantly interrogating how the split-personality battle for dominance between the abused and timid housewife, Eve White, and her nymphomaniac "trailer trash" double, Eve Black, reaches crisis point and is "cured" through the mediation of a paternalistic and apparently Northern psychiatrist. The therapeutic recall of a long-repressed childhood trauma and the emergence of Jane, a third personality with no Southern accent but with solid middle-class values and ambitions, successfully kills off the two "white-trash" Eves. Graham argues that by consistently marking Southernness as Other, the film "provides reassurance that whiteness itself is not an issue. Through its insistence on its own realism and documentary truth, *The Three Faces of Eve* plays midwife to the birth of an icon of the New South: the educated, accentless, supremely genuine everywoman of the fifties" (109).

In an article excerpted from her definitive book-length study *The Invention of Dolores del Río*, Joanne Hershfield examines the economics of race through the confluence of Hollywood's Latin-American musical genre with FDR's pan-American Good Neighbor Policy of the 1930s and 1940s. Hershfield uses the case of Mexican-émigré star del Río "to interrogate how cinematic representations of racialized sexuality were negotiated in response to Hollywood's dependence on foreign markets" (140). Also of great interest is Marguerite H. Rippy's incisive essay, "Commodity, Tragedy, Desire: Female Sexuality and Blackness in the Iconography of Dorothy Dandridge." Rippy closely reads Dandridge's 50s sex-goddess image through contemporary discourses of interracial desire and the suffering black female body in films such as *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Tamango* (1957), and *Island in the Sun* (1957).

The anthology's "War" section includes Martin F. Norden's "Coward, Take My Coward's Hand: Racism, Ableism and the Veteran Problem in *Home of the Brave* and *Bright Victory*." The essay perceptively explores how these liberal and well-intentioned postwar Hollywood films still managed to imply "that a disabled white man and an able-bodied African-American are on the same social footing (in other words, that a disabling injury to a white man abruptly 'reduces' him to the status of an African-American man)" (344). And Geoffrey M. White and Jane Yi's "*December 7th*: Race and Nation in Wartime Documentary" investigates two different versions of this 1943 film made for the military by John Ford and Gregg Toland—the edited-down 34-minute version that won an Academy Award for best short documentary and the government-suppressed 83-minute version that surfaced on video in the 1980s. The full-length latter version surreally interpolates into the documentary the fictional characters of Walter Huston's Uncle Sam (as a Panglossian pacifist and multiculturalist vacationing in Honolulu on Saturday, December 6th, 1941) and his hard-nosed conscience, "Mr. C" (Harry Davenport). On the eve of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the two figures crossfire debate about whether the ethnically Japanese residents of Hawaii are loyal Americans or might actually be fifth-column agents of Japan's military expansion.

Space limitations prevent me from giving adequate recognition to all 19 of the diverse, well-researched, and consistently enlightening contributions to the anthology. The authors and co-authors of the remaining articles include Karen Wallace, Thomas E. Wartenberg, Gary W. McDonogh and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, Roberta E. Pearson, Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, Karla Rae Fuller, Brian O'Neil, Arthur Knight, Sarah Madsen Hardy and Kelly Thomas, and Peter Stanfield. Despite the book's compartmentalizing divisions into four main subject headings, the essays themselves stubbornly seem to resist such boundary markers. Rather, they cumulatively prove just how inextricably issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, genre, censorship, and markets were interwoven into American studio industrial practices during the 1930–1960 period covered. The book is well illustrated with supporting visual evidence reproduced from production stills, frame enlargements, and extrafilmic promotional materials, and contains a comprehensive bibliography of works in whiteness studies and critical race theory and on race in Classical Hollywood cinema. Bernardi's two anthology collections to date are both of vital scholarly importance and relevance—documenting and interpreting how American film from its inception has reified, racialized, and policed a color line that excluded African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans from the privileges of whiteness (both in employment practices and in representations of a national imaginary). Still, the editor's introduction to *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* admits that the project of addressing whiteness in Classical Hollywood cinema remains far from complete, and he calls for wider-ranging explorations of race in genres including film noir and black films, in John Ford Westerns such as *The Searchers*, and in other canonized classics such as *Gone with the Wind*.

Adding to Bernardi's list, I would also call for expanded critical investigations into the interstitial, ambiguous, and paradoxical spaces where cultural constructions of race, ethnicity, class, immigration, assimilation, and resistance intersect (as explored, for example, in the penetrating articles by Sammond, Mukerji, and Marchetti cited earlier). A previous major anthology which appeared in 1991, Lester D. Friedman's *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, now reads even more resonantly alongside the two Bernardi volumes. All three collections are part of a common larger project of deconstructing the invisibility of

whiteness as the normative and unmarked racial position while also historically interrogating the power, privileges, and nonmonolithic malleability of white identity politics in America. Meanwhile, Diane Negra's *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (2001) has further nuanced critical inquiries into cultural productions of whiteness by mapping some of its internal hierarchies and problematic fissures. Her pathbreaking work examines disruptive aspects of European and Euro-American ethnicity in the "white ethnic" star personae of Colleen Moore, Pola Negri, Sonja Henie, Hedy Lamarr, Marisa Tomei, and Cher, actresses whose qualified whiteness troubled "the security of white identity whose power has historically derived from its status as the normative unnamed." In *White*, Richard Dyer called for the project of "making whiteness strange." Given the fact that the contributors to *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* come from departments and disciplines as diverse as American studies, anthropology, communications, ethnic studies, English, film, gender studies, history, philosophy, postcolonial studies, psychology, sociology, and urban studies, Dyer's manifesto clearly continues to invite politically engaged and iconoclastic studies of whiteness from an impressive number of interdisciplinary fronts.

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The Reel Civil War

Mythmaking in American Film

By Bruce Chadwick. New York: Knopf, 2001. $27.50.

Picture this: "An Atlanta schoolgirl who saw *The Birth of a Nation* and loved it so much that she asked her family to take her back to see it a dozen times. The girl organized her friends and staged a play based on *The Birth of a Nation,* with twelve-year-old boys and girls dressed as Klansmen chasing a class-mate in blackface around her living room 'stage.'"

It is not always pleasing to have one's suspicions confirmed, and Bruce Chadwick's *The Reel Civil War* more than amply confirms several of mine. The schoolgirl was Margaret Mitchell, who went on to publish *Gone with the Wind* in 1936. "The works of (the Rev) Thomas Dixon (*The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*—from which *The Birth of a Nation* was adapted; *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden*; and *The Traitor: a Story of the Rise and Fall of the Invisible Empire*) had a particularly strong impact on her. . . . 'I was practically raised on your books,' she told Dixon, 'and I love them very much.'"

The story of what Margaret Mitchell already loved at age 15 is the linchpin of *The Reel Civil War,* which demonstrates that what connects *The Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind* is far more significant than what separates them (24 years, Technicolor, and sound.) Both films epically, self-consciously, and expensively depict what Chadwick nicely terms a "moonlight and magnolia" South of white-colonnaded mansions, beautiful women, handsome men, and happy slaves, a South destroyed in all but honor by brutal, uncouth Northern armies, rapacious carpetbaggers, and their deluded African-American pawns. All this is—to put it kindly—at variance with the historical record; and all of it was defended, each time round, in a painstakingly orchestrated publicity blitz, itself of epic proportions, that aimed to establish its historical accuracy and veracity as a way of establishing the filmmakers' innocence and lack of bias. As Louis Hartz once wrote (in *The Liberal Tradition in America*), "There is an appalling complexity to innocence, especially when your point of departure is guilt."

Chadwick has done his homework, and has written an alarming book—a more alarming book than he may think, for he locates a pattern of celluloid distortion of U.S. history fairly and squarely in the past, while some of us suspect its effects might linger on even unto the present day. Even so, there is much about this past to be gleaned from his account. To begin with, there is the sheer thematic centrality of the Civil War during what Edward Wagenacht (oh so wrongly) called the movies' "age of innocence" (in his *Movies in the Age of Innocence*) and beyond. (*The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* are among the five biggest and most profitable blockbusters of all time.) "Movies about the Civil War era, shown from the first year feature films were screened, make up the largest group of films (more than seven hundred—approximately five hundred silents and two hundred sound) concerning any war or historical event in (U.S.) history (nearly three times the number of films about World War Two). . . . There were thirteen Civil War movies made in 1908, twenty-three such features in 1909, and then nearly a hundred a year through 1916."

Griffith himself had directed ten Civil War films before *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. *The Birth of a Nation* capped and amended a distorted context that was already set in stone by that date. Chadwick has seen and can tell us about many of the surviving five hundred silents, most of which are one- or two-reelers, and all of which, with rare exceptions, portray Southerners as heroic underdogs; ignore slavery as an issue, let alone a cause of the conflict; portray slaves as happy with their lot ("the concept of a happy land full of gentlemen rudely attacked by Union troops could work only if slaves . . . were content. . . . Most of the silents depicted slaves as not only satisfied in slavery, but willing to give their lives to preserve it"); and portray postwar reconciliation, usually symbolized by North-South marriage, at the expense of African Americans. "It seemed that to realize reunification, the Civil War's political and cultural history had almost to be rewritten so that Southerners would never again be seen as harsh slave owners or as people who started—and lost—the war. . . . Novelists, playwrights (Dixon was both) and magazine writers reinvented Southern slaveholders as noble cavaliers,

fighting not for slavery but for states' rights and the honor of their Southern women and families." They "won on the screen what they lost on the battlefield."

But, Chadwick adds, "the myth had a high price. The only way the mythmakers could wash away the bitterness between North and South and bring about reunification was to erase the fundamental cause of the war and all its death and destruction—slavery. . . . The inevitable corollary to this absolution for slavery . . . was the movies' complete denial of dignity to African Americans, the former slaves. . . . Films showed Americans that they could be reunited after the end of the Civil War—but reunited in their whiteness."

What *The Birth of a Nation* added to a mix it played no part in founding was an explosive catalyst: the view that African Americans "are surly people who can be controlled in bondage, but not when free. If given freedom, as they are in Griffith's version of Reconstruction, they will become black beasts. . . . The Ku Klux Klan was necessary to rein in the blacks, to keep them in their place, and save society." Jane Addams, one of the few non-NAACP writers—one of the few white writers—to condemn the "magnificent vision" of *The Birth of a Nation,* correctly indicated that the film's African Americans were "worse than childish and brutal and vicious—(they were) actually grotesque and primitive and despicable."

By the time *Gone with the Wind* opened in 1939, KKK membership, which had been boosted by the commercial success of *The Birth of a Nation,* had climbed to over 300,000. David O. Selznick, all too aware of the Klan's extra added bonus of anti-Semitism—the Klan was strong in Los Angeles—had no desire to encourage its further expansion. The Klan and its robes, which had had a place in Margaret Mitchell's novel, were thus "left on the cutting-room floor."

Even so, Chadwick is quite right to insist that "the fingerprints of *The Birth of a Nation* were all over *Gone with the Wind*." For one thing, "eliminating the Klan removed vigilantism from the Southern makeup and undercut any thought that Southerners . . . should go outside the law for justice." What found no place on the cutting-room floor with the Klan's shroud-like regalia was the view that Reconstruction "was a deliberate and aggressive campaign by Northerners to destroy economically whatever Sherman and Grant's troops had not destroyed militarily."

Over and above this, *Gone with the Wind* "bolstered the four-pronged presentation of the plantation myth that the Old South was a special place ruined forever . . . 1) all white Southerners were rich plantation owners and, in their personal lives, well-educated, romantic cavaliers; 2) white Southerners loved their slaves and their slaves loved them and they all just wanted to be left alone; 3) the North started the war, forcing the gentlemen of the South to fight the Lost Cause for four long years, to lose in the end, but to lose gallantly; 4) the South was devastated by Reconstruction . . . and never recovered."

Chadwick, in having indicated and documented how racist ideology does its work and spins its web, has evidently done us all a service. But *The Reel Civil War* has its demerits too. Ironically, Chadwick's grip falters once he starts to cover material with which most of his readers will be more familiar. His chapter on Lincoln, which seems to have been tacked on to his account of plantation movies, sags. His argument trails off markedly in *The Reel Civil War*'s later chapters, where "reel" is extended—for reasons he doesn't explain—to cover TV as well as Hollywood. Chadwick leaves loose ends dangling; his later, post-*Gone with the Wind* chapters lack focus; and (most amazing of all) he seems not to have read Michael Rogin's *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* and *Blackface, White Noise*. (This is as good a place as any to pay tribute to the late Michael Rogin's enormous contribution to film scholarship.) Chadwick calls attention to William K. Everson's mealy-mouthed statement that *The Birth of a Nation* "should be shown in an atmosphere that tries to separate form from content." But it is an abiding disgrace of our profession—Rogin memorably gave voice to this point—that precious distinctions between "form" and "content" worked so hard for so long to prevent us from seeing what *The Birth of a Nation* (and, by extension, *Gone with the Wind*) were about.

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Roberto Rossellini Magician of the Real

Edited by David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: BFI, 2000/University of California Press, 2001. $65.00 cloth; $27.95 paper.

Roberto Rossellini's career is both exemplary and eclectic in the history of motion pictures in the second half of the twentieth century. It encompasses his wartime feature films under Fascism, the dissonant facets of his Neorealist works, the shifts and turns of the "Ingrid Bergman era," and his utopian television projects of the late 1960s and 70s. As such, his work, though uneven, as David Forgacs reminds us in his introduction to this collection of essays—and perhaps because of this unevenness—commends critical revisitations and debates that have not been put to rest. The British Film Institute itself had published in 1981 a slim dossier of articles on Rossellini (edited by Don Ranvaud). No longer available, this dossier must have been in some ways a model for the current collection. Also from the BFI (2001) is Forgacs's own focused study of *Rome Open City*. But for more comprehensive views, one can still find in print the monographs by Peter Brunette (Oxford, 1987/California, 1996) and Peter Bondanella (1993), both of which work through a film-by-film interpretation (the former offering a more comprehensive view). What we have also been treated to in English is a voluminous biography by Tag Gallagher (De Capo Press, 1998): a veritable Rosselliniana treasury of everything from facts and figures through assemblages of contexts and opinions, gossip included—some of which is useful. Unlike

Gianni Rondolino's 1989 Italian critical biography, however, Gallagher's book holds both too much and too little for a reader in search of finer thematics, focused debates, and sophisticated analyses. In this respect, the new BFI collection is truly a welcome contribution to English-language writings on Rossellini, as it is on the larger debates surrounding his work: Neorealism and modernism in postwar film culture, its transfigurations in the 1960s and 70s, and the intersections of aesthetics, pedagogy, and communication in the arenas of cinema, television, and visual culture at large.

Though unimposing in size, the book offers an intriguing variety of critical approaches, each defining its domain differently—this in a span of a brief foreword, a chronology, an editor's introduction, nine essays, and selected documents and references. The contributors are chiefly British academics, with two Italians and one scholar from a U.S. university, yet Martin Scorsese's foreword captures one's attention with the insight (one that perhaps only an Italian-American filmmaker of his sensibility would have had) of associating *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), a rigorous pedagogical film produced for television, with the gangster genre. Scorsese's foreword, like Forgacs's introduction, serves to remind us, then, how much Rossellini is a directors' director, whose dialogue with filmmakers and with cinema continues beyond the celebrated reception of the French New Wave. But not this or any of the essays, nor even the epigraphs, explains to me the subtitle of the volume—*Magician of the Real*—one that would seem to designate the sleights of hand of a Fellini or the political polemics of a De Sica, rather than the aesthetic complexity and pitfalls, the pedagogic utopianism, the high seriousness, the *ambition* of Rossellini's project. One must assume, from lack of indication of sources or of work in progress elsewhere, that these are all new contributions, written for this volume. The table of contents suggests a rough chronology following Rossellini's work of nearly four decades, with some essays focusing on particular films (e.g., Laura Mulvey on *Journey to Italy,* Sam Rohdie on *India*), and others offering a larger historical and discursive scope (Christopher Wagstaff on Neorealism, Adriano Aprà on the pedagogical work for television). And in fact one finds in the collection excellent instances of both.

Nowell-Smith's contribution, "North and South, East and West: Rossellini and Politics," could really serve as another editor's introduction, conveying the geographic *figure,* as it were, of Rossellini's career and how it still matters, perhaps from the vantage point of European unification. One wonders—in light of Ben-Ghiat's article on the Fascist trilogy—why Nowell-Smith designates the "first" Rossellini as the one of high Neorealism, omitting the earlier features. Indeed the periodizing of Rossellini's work and its shifts, with each film a "coup," as Nowell-Smith observes, continually invites a critical search for an underlying system. He locates such a coherence in Rossellini's politics, binding the shifts with the changing political climate in Italy. He shows how the emblematic Italian question of North and South—addressed by the most rigorously political filmmakers—is in fact superseded in Rossellini's work by the larger thematics of (non)communication which engages different sides of Europe in the postwar era of recovery and reconstruction, and is also linked to the global configurations of the Cold War. Nowell-Smith underlines the tensions, the ideological problematics between Rossellini's Euro- and Italo-centered vision (not without some problematic echoes of youth under Fascism) and his vision of a larger unity, his curiosity about and response to the Third World on the one hand and the impact of American culture and mass communications on the other.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a cultural historian whose work on Fascist modernism constitutes an important recent contribution to the study of Italian cinema, offers in "The Fascist War Trilogy" a rigorous contextualization of Rossellini's wartime trilogy. While the three films—*La nave bianca* (*The White Ship,* 1941), *Un pilota ritorna* (*A Pilot Returns,* 1942), and *L'uomo della croce* (*The Man with the Cross,* 1943)—have been addressed by scholars, it was often either by way of trying to "rescue" Rossellini from the militant propaganda that they engage, or else to isolate their formal elements. Ben-Ghiat places these films in the context of debates on realism already flourishing under Fascism, offering a nuanced evaluation of what went into the making of such work: the circumstances, institutions, economics, and political imperatives that informed their production—and their aesthetic. In light of this, she also cites their subtle continuities—the Manichean, at times expressionistic, mode, the portrayal of the enemy, the vision of Christian fraternity—with Rossellini's paradigmatic Neorealist film, *Rome Open City* (1945). Certainly the filmmaker's about-face upon the fall of Fascism was emblematic of Italy at large at that historical moment, but work like Ben-Ghiat's serves to account for how this was possible vis-à-vis cultural currents that traversed the war.

Alan Millen's superb essay offers, to me, the finest insights on the depth, and *reach,* of Rossellini's modernism through a consideration of a single film, the unparalleled *Francis God's Jester* (1950). Nested in the Bergman era, this film offers perhaps the toughest challenge to Rossellini criticism for its binding of high seriousness of message and faith with comedic elements, for its deceptive simplicity of means and the difficulty of grouping it within the œuvre. Millen differentiates mimetic and indexical values in Rossellini's realism, developing Bazinian cues that are still, so often, over-simplified by critics. He examines in this way Rossellini's reenactment strategies in the use of nonprofessional actors, whose emotional accessibility and rehearsal of their articles of faith are set against the virtuoso performance, the gesticulations, of the actor in their midst. It is through his refined, never naïve discussion of realism that Millen links the St. Francis film with later work, accounting for the ways in which the historical and the contemporary, the timeless and the timely, intersect in Rossellini's projects of adaptation and reconstruction. Millen analyzes Rossellini's treatment of the written document and its oral enactment in motion pictures, associating the film's aesthetic system with that of

the silent film comedy. He finally places this complex text in the context of contemporary debates—to which, he shows, Rossellini must have been very close—within the Christian Democrat party on the question of Italy's entry into NATO. Rossellini's search for the unity of human experience and the film's call for peace—while resonating in the artificial space of the medieval *exemplum,* or the historical lacuna—are no longer, with this added perspective, detached from current events and political debates. One finds here an exemplary way in which a nuanced reading of Rossellini's aesthetic need not dissolve in a depoliticized, generalized humanism (the disingenuous position that Rossellini himself may at times have articulated in interviews and writings). Rather, a continued engagement with his practice, at its best, will address the specific forms that his "vulnerable idealism," which was rarely transparent, has taken, and where criticism still finds riches and depths in which to work.

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Sure Seaters

The Emergence of Art House Cinema

By Barbara Wilinsky. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. $47.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

The recent proliferation of specialty cable channels featuring various genres of "quality" movies—Bravo, Turner Classic Movies, American Movie Classics, Independent Film Channel, Sundance Channel—attests to the crucial role currently played by distribution and exhibition circuits in shaping ideas about art, industry, and independence in film and visual culture. Far removed from their original contexts of production, films are continually repackaged according to the brand identities and archival holdings of big and bigger media corporations. A casual stroll through the neighborhood Blockbuster Video store further reminds us that terms such as "foreign," "classic," and "independent" are difficult to disentangle from the corporate structures that broker our access to films past and present. In other words, "foreignness" is always the product of "domestic" discourses; "classics" are an aftereffect of ongoing attempts to increase the value of the inventory; "independence" is often only a mask for the operations of global media conglomerates.

Barbara Wilinsky's *Sure Seaters* lends historical perspective to this state of affairs by tracing some of the complex industrial, cultural, and discursive shifts underpinning the art-house cinema movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Focusing on the period in which "art house cinema" became an identifiable mode of theatrical exhibition, Wilinsky invites us to ask: Where's the art in art cinema? Following the move in film studies away from an emphasis on formalist, auteurist, and ahistorical examinations of select films, Walinsky argues that what distinguishes art cinema from other film genres has historically been not so much criteria of aesthetic innovation or modes of production but rather marketing strategies combined with the particularities of sociohistorical context. For Wilinsky, understanding art cinema begins not with a canon of great films or filmmakers, but with a set of industry practices and a change in patterns of consumption and leisure.

The strength of *Sure Seaters* resides in its attempt to chart the consolidation of a new kind of cinemagoing, one that was the product of specific marketing, programming, and design strategies orchestrated largely by film distributors and exhibitors. In contrast to practices predominant in mainstream film culture, such strategies relied on the discursive association of films and theaters with qualities of sophistication, adultness, exclusivity, intelligence, and foreignness. Programs and posters included quotes from prominent critics. Directors-as-artists were often foregrounded in film notes and membership mailings. The attendance of children was often discouraged, if not outright forbidden. Concession stands featured coffee rather than popcorn. The very design of theaters embodied similar logics. Elaborate lounges contained magazines, newspapers, and comfortable furniture. Paintings adorned lobby walls. Casual lingering and serious discussion were encouraged. It was practices such as these that facilitated the transformation of an "ethnic" film, shown in an Italo-phone neighborhood, to an "art film," shown in an upscale Fifth Avenue playhouse.

Sure Seaters also resonates with the surge of interest in non-U.S. and non-European cinemas: African, Iranian, and Chinese, to name but a few. Breaking apart the longstanding and uneven canon of world cinema, such work has reminded us that not all foreign films are equally foreign. In the United States, "foreign film" has until recently often meant Western European, with occasional forays into Japanese or Indian cinema. *Sure Seaters* demonstrates that art-house practices contributed to the construction of a particular kind of "foreignness" in film by largely—though not exclusively—programming films from Western European directors and production houses. Wilinsky is careful to point out that the producers of these films were equally driven by profit motives and a consequent willingness to shape their product to attract larger audiences. Doing so required grappling with a series of mechanisms designed to safeguard American interests, economic and moral. Federal, state, and local censor boards, the industry's own Production Code, civic and religious groups as well as distribution companies all intervened to have a say in what kind of "foreign" was acceptable and what kind was not. By associating the term "foreign" with the term "art," exhibitors as well as film critics and filmgoers attempted to circumvent these mechanisms. In the process, such articulations functioned to obfuscate the close ties of art-house exhibitors to dominant industry practices as well as to romanticize foreign films, construing them as more pure aesthetic objects, ostensibly free from the taint of American commercial forms.

In short, *Sure Seaters* argues that terms usually associated with art-house cinema, such as "alternative," "independent,"

and "foreign," are rarely suited to any kind of pure or simple application when it comes to the economy in which films circulate. Wilinsky concretizes these assertions by examining programs, playbills, newsletters, industry literature, and popular criticism, tending to the ways such crucial terms have masked the underlying contradictions inherent to them and ensured art cinema's non-disruptive place in the full palette of industry-controlled offerings. *Sure Seaters* argues that art cinema is an effect of carefully managed market differentiation, easily contained and appropriated by Hollywood's overarching machine. The public to which films were sold as sophisticated, intelligent, and edifying was largely those middle-class adults who were eager to distinguish themselves from the ostensibly homogeneous comfort of the growing middle class.

This is a book built on ideas relevant for exploring the complex relations between class, art, nation, and the business of film. What makes one film "art" and not another? What are the mechanisms by which "foreignness" is sustained in American cinema culture? What are the material and institutional conditions in which films deemed "art" circulate? Unfortunately, in its valuable and detailed attention to industry literature, the book still leaves the impression that the author has missed an opportunity to fully articulate the impact of her findings and to pursue the import of her questions. For instance, the success and cultural significance of art-house cinema is largely explained as an effect of middle-class affluence and an emergent politics of taste. Unattached to any further consideration of the relationship between taste and social power, middlebrow art designates a banal cultural politic characterized by empty time-spending and polite self-display. Are middlebrow cultural practices and the middle class often implicitly attached to them so homogeneous and simple? What else might be said about the confluence of art and film in the late 1940s and early 1950s? How might these practices compare to other art practices of the time? Does this indicate any specificity in the relationship between film and art and money? Why would foreign films become so fashionable at a time when HUAC and the Cold War were ascendant forces in American culture? Further, in light of existing scholarship examining the ways in which "art cinema" is a frequently invoked strategy in non-U.S. countries to oppose America's international domination of indigenous film cultures, a consideration of the cultural specificities of America's art cinema by way of comparison would undoubtedly have proved useful. In other words, what is distinct about American constructions of art and foreignness in films compared to the constructions of the same by other nations? These and other questions will surely provide fertile ground for future work.

Clearly, Wilinksy's project is an important one, even if its execution is less precise than one would like. Nevertheless, I found myself strangely yearning for a discussion of why an idealized category such as "film art" or "art house" might have mattered for an emergent set of cinema practices in the 1950s and beyond. Wilinsky mentions the obvious links to the growth of film studies, to film societies, to film literature, and to the increasing importance of universities as sites for generative social and political challenge. Yet none of these movements is considered significant enough to warrant more than a brief mention in the book's introduction. In her rush to situate film art within the larger rubric of film business, important distinctions between diverse movements are lost. A more nuanced discussion of what is at stake in struggles over what does and doesn't constitute *film art* and *film art practice* would have helped make this book a richer contribution. Instead, Jonas Mekas and film practices ostensibly "free" from the weight of capitalism are held up as the only legitimate models for art and film's commingling. In the end, Wilinsky directs us back to the high modernist tenets she initially sets out to dismantle.

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Women of Vision

Histories in Feminist Film and Video

Edited by Alexandra Juhasz. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. $49.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video, edited by media producer and scholar Alexandra Juhasz, is a written companion to the 1998 documentary she produced and directed, *Women of Vision: Eighteen Histories in Feminist Film and Video*. Together these two texts reclaim and validate 30-odd years of feminist media in the United States, and thus help to fill significant gaps in the histories of both media and feminism. With its goal of "mapping the field" rather than producing a definitive history, *Women of Vision* focuses on a diverse group of women whose work is associated with feminist media.

One of the primary strengths of *Women of Vision* is its exposure and exploration of various individuals, roles, practices, and institutions that have constructed the broad field of feminist media culture. Whereas many other texts on feminist media (e.g., Judith Redding and Victoria Brownworth's *Film Fatales: Independent Women Directors*) focus primarily on filmmakers and their work, *Women of Vision* throws a wider net to encompass and celebrate women involved in other forms of media production, particularly video, as well as other aspects of media culture, including distribution, exhibition, activism, and scholarship.

Juhasz's 90-minute documentary is composed of three segments, each of which includes six interviews with women associated with specific periods of feminist media history. The first segment, "Creating an Infrastructure," focuses on women involved in the founding of institutions which have supported feminist media artists, activists, and scholars in the U.S.: Pearl Bowser, Margaret Caples, Kate Horsfield, Constance Penley, Julia Reichert, and Carolee Schneeman.

The second piece, "Mothers, Lovers, and Mentors," highlights film- and videomakers whose careers began at the same time as the rise of the women's movement of the 1970s: Michelle Citron, Vanalyne Green, Barbara Hammer, Susan Mogul, Juanita Mohammed, and Victoria Vesna. The final segment, "Reassembly Required," includes interviews with artists and scholars who began working in media culture in the 1980s and 90s: Megan Cunningham, Carol Leigh, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Eve Oishi, Valerie Soe, and Yvonne Welbon. The book restructures the documentary's 18 interviews according to the women's birthdates, and also includes conversations with two other young women involved in feminist media: Wendy Quinn and Cheryl Dunye.

While the documentary has the advantage of exposing its audience directly to the work of feminist media producers, the book benefits from the addition of Juhasz's comprehensive introduction, which contextualizes issues raised in the interviews in relation to feminist politics, cultural activism, media theory, arts funding, and technological change. In addition, the book provides a list of each interviewee's contributions to the field, as well as contact and distribution/publication information, an invaluable resource for readers interested in delving deeper into feminist media culture.

Meant to be read with and against each other, the book's 20 interviews raise numerous topics of interest to feminists and those involved in the media: the development of feminism as a social, political, and cultural movement; feminist aesthetic strategies, particularly the role of the author and the female body; the relationship between feminist media and activism; the various challenges faced by, as well as opportunities made available to, women born at different times and under different social conditions; the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age in feminist identity; the relationship of feminist art and theory; the importance of role models in the lives of feminist artists and scholars; the effects of technological developments on feminist media; the institutionalization of feminist media production and scholarship; the impact of censorship and defunding of the arts on feminist media; and the relationship of feminism to other activist movements.

One of *Women of Vision*'s primary goals is drawing attention to and validating the forgotten work and silenced experiences of feminist media producers and scholars, especially those who began their careers in the 1960s and 70s. While Juhasz encourages the older interviewees to claim their place in feminist media history, the younger interviewees are already poignantly aware of the debt they owe to those who came before them. Interestingly, in addition to citing female role models, many of the interviewees reveal their gratitude toward the various men who influenced their approaches to media production, critical theory, and cultural activism, which suggests that further attention should be given to the role of men in feminist history at large. One unfortunate aspect of the book is that many filmmakers and scholars who are significant to feminist media history (e.g., Chantal Akerman, Joyce Chopra, Julie Dash, Laura Mulvey, Susana Muñoz) are mentioned only in the interviewees' comments, a situation which may leave some readers less inclined to seek out the work of these individuals and thus expand their knowledge of the field.

While each interviewee's commitment to media and women is palpable, one of the most striking similarities among the various members of this diverse group—particularly the women of color and those born in the 1960s and 70s—is how hesitant, and in some cases resistant, they are to adopting "feminist" as the primary marker of their identity, work, and politics. Indeed, many of the women see feminism as only one among many of the social forces that constitute their subjectivity and approach to media. Nevertheless, Oishi presents a convincing argument for collecting this diverse group of women under the feminist umbrella: "[W]hat is valuable about feminism is its looseness and its ability to adapt itself to different needs and to different people's experiences. It's an analytical tool, not necessarily an object or something static. And so you can trace strains of feminism, feminist politics, through all kinds of complicated histories that may not be identifiable as *feminist* to many people."

At the same time, many of the younger interviewees seem unwilling to adopt the anti-commercial ideology that drove earlier feminist media producers toward independent production. Instead, these young women suggest that contemporary media culture is a far more complex realm of interdependent forces than the "alternative vs. mainstream" paradigm allows. Thus, they express little reluctance to having their films and videos distributed through commercial channels, including television, as they recognize the need to connect with larger audiences.

As the interviewees' different perspectives on media and feminism suggest, one of *Women of Vision*'s most interesting effects is its deconstruction of the typical portrayal of feminism as structured by easily differentiated "waves" of women who think and act alike. What this project reveals instead is that feminism, and thus feminist media, has always been in flux and unstable; never fixed, it has been able to stay relevant and powerful by adapting to new social phenomena and political climates.

While I don't want to diminish the tremendous contribution the *Women of Vision* project makes to both feminist and media history, the book is far less compelling when read in the absence of the documentary, which allows the viewer to experience first-hand the power of feminist films and videos. One strategy for overcoming this problem might have been the production of a CD-ROM, which could have incorporated both audiovisual clips and written commentary and thus engaged the user in a more interactive educational experience. Nevertheless, kudos to Juhasz and the many other women who collaborated on *Women of Vision* for producing two texts that present a field as rich in history as it is in possibility.

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Youssef Chahine

By Ibrahim Fawal. London: BFI, 2001/University of California Press, 2001. $65.00 cloth. $24.95 paper.

Given the quality, diversity, and international significance of Youssef Chahine's work, an English-language book on his career is long overdue. This one adequately fills that gap. Its approach is straightforward and accessible; however, for readers familiar with the subject, there are few surprises here. The 14 films studied in depth, from *Cairo Station* (1958) to *Destiny* (1997), are those traditionally considered Chahine's best. Grouped into four categories—social dramas and melodramas, wartime and postwar films, autobiographical, historical—the films are synopsized, placed into an historical and political context, and then evaluated in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of their narrative construction and stylistic execution. Fawal values Chahine's ability to coordinate multistranded, multilayered narratives in his best work (for example, *The Sparrow* [1973]), and celebrates the vivid appositeness of certain unforgettable images in even his more banal films (for example, *Lover's Complaint* [1961]). The immediate task for a book of this nature must be to entice readers new to Chahine and unfamiliar with Egyptian history and film culture to see more of his films. The text and the generous selection of illustrations, including 17 color stills, serve this purpose well.

Fawal's access to Arabic primary sources expands, albeit sparingly, the information previously available to readers limited to occasional essays about or interviews with Chahine in English. Controversies in the Egyptian press surrounding *Adieu Bonaparte* (1985), *The Emigrant* (1994), and *Destiny* are fleshed out. Chahine's films, especially these epics with more of a populist orientation than his autobiographical works, often generate a political resonance which few contemporary European or North American films attain. Arab critics and audiences respond passionately and vociferously to these allegories of (neo)colonialism and liberation, cultural interaction, secularism, and fundamentalism and the follies of authoritarianism. Fawal explores this in more detail than any English-language precursor, but it is a crucial area of analysis which could have been taken further. September 11th and its aftermath reinforces the importance of Western readers gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the sentiments and debates these films address and provoke in the Arab world. These polyphonic contexts are often overlooked or simplified when the films are screened in the West.

Fawal's approach concurs with that of European and American critics who, predictably enough, have assessed Chahine's work primarily in relation to familiar reference points, namely Hollywood genre films; Fellini for the autobiographical trilogy *Alexandria . . . Why?* (1978), *An Egyptian Story* (1982), and *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989); and Neorealism for *Cairo Station*. Fawal's discussion of the latter film's similarities and differences to Italian Neorealism is incisive, but does not pursue its relationship to Egyptian melodramas of the 1950s. The bulk of Chahine's output during the 1950s and 60s, which for the most part is located within established Egyptian genres, is bypassed in favor of the more highly acclaimed later films. This is consistent with the way that, throughout this book, the relationship between Chahine's work and other Egyptian films is underexplored. An opportunity to delineate some of their specificity for Egyptian and Arab audiences, or to explain why certain of Chahine's films fail to engage them, is therefore missed. Apart from a useful analysis of the distinctive role of musical interludes in Chahine's films, there is little discussion of how they relate to narrative patterns, genres, trends, and stylistic repertoires in Egyptian cinema more generally. Ideally, more discussion of his films' audiences and the role of the few cinemas owned by his production company, Misr International, would have been illuminating. Chahine's status as a giant of world cinema disregarded by English-speaking cinephiles is consolidated, but important aspects of his interventions into Egyptian and Arab film culture remain obscure.

The book contains glowing testimonials to Chahine from colleagues and stars, including Hind Rustum and Yousra, but detaching his oeuvre from its location within Egyptian cinema narrows the scope for discussing exactly how films such as *Cairo Station* and *The Emigrant* inflect these women's star images in progressive directions. The wider, conventionally defined political context for each film is deftly sketched, but gender politics is barely registered, and a vital dimension of Chahine's work and its impact upon younger filmmakers thereby disappears. Other directors, including his former assistant Yousry Nasrallah, and Tunisian admirers Nouri Bouzid, Férid Boughedir, and Moufida Tlatli, eschew the representation of conventionally defined political struggles such as wars, demonstrations, and strikes that recur across Chahine's work in each of the four categories Fawal identifies. The influence all these younger directors acknowledge is Chahine's trail-blazing refusal to accept normative or one-dimensional gender definitions. Fawal devotes a short section of the book's conclusion to the elusive queerness of some of Chahine's films, but disappointingly reproduces other critics' comments rather than adding anything new.

The conclusion all too briefly raises several issues which could more profitably have been introduced at the outset and pursued throughout the book. One is whether Chahine's practice can be related to debates about Third Cinema and filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène as well as the European auteurs he is more commonly compared to. Chahine's later work can indeed be usefully discussed in relation to the expanded definition of Third Cinema developed by Teshome Gabriel and, more recently, Paul Willemen and Mike Wayne. Of course, its immediate context is radically different from the 1960s Latin American one in which Solanas and Getino drafted their Third Cinema manifesto. In contemporary Egypt, various fundamentalist and secular discourses contest or negotiate not only one another but also neocolonialism, globalization, and Egypt's stance toward Israel. Class conflicts and competing definitions of gender and sexuality circulate within these. Chahine's work engages this complex

spectrum, provoking Egyptian and Arab spectators in particular to reflection, action, and outrage. Fawal's book does not extend our understanding of Chahine's work as fully as it might have done, but it will hopefully serve to draw a wider readership's attention to the achievements of this singular filmmaker, who has consistently sought to merge progressive politics with an abundance of visual and aural pleasure.

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Book Note

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Barlet, Olivier. *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*. New York: Zed Books, 1996, trans. Chris Turner, 2000. $69.00 cloth; $29.00 paper. Olivier Barlet has adroitly painted a picture of the cinema cultures of Africa, tracing in a simple yet erudite fashion the film histories of the continent from the Maghreb to the Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, and South African regions. His extensive interviews with African filmmakers contribute immensely to his clear vision of the dynamics at work in the production of the cinemas of Africa (although unfortunately there are so many films mentioned that there is not room for more than scanty information about each).

The book is divided into three well-crafted parts that reflect thematic, narrative, and economic approaches. The thematic approach engages the Western gaze and African responses in a decolonizing style. The narrative section focuses on the unique elements that give identity to the cinemas of Africa: black humor, the role of silence, the significance of language, orality, symbols, the talking drums, sound, myth, pace, space, and time. The economic section deals with the hardcore realities that are at play in the production of African films: the financial ordeals of the directors, foreign aid, freedom of expression, difficulties of production and distribution (including the problem of language, which greatly hampers distribution of African films).

Barlet is the first writer to focus extensively on feminist themes and on women film directors' contribution to the African film industry; he also discusses television production and the important role of the audience. In a style that reads like a text for the student of African cinema, a reference book for the teacher, and a compendium of knowledge of African film history, culture, and politics for the general public, the book describes how African cinema has progressed from the simple presentation of reality in the 1980s to a highly paradoxical form of enunciation in the 90s. Nobody can feel at home in black cinema studies without reading this book.

—Thomas Ebong